

PROJECT ANGELBOOK - VOLUME XII - PART 18

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EZEKIEL REDIK YARBROUGH

Reliquiae Tenebrae – Scripta
Daemoniorum – Project AngelBook –
Volume XII – Part 18
By Ezekiel Redik Yarbrough (DBM
ECLIPZE)

Liminal Archivist's Note

On the Preservation of Distorted Gnosis and the Dying Digital Veil

There is a strange ache that comes from spending all day in the ruins of spiritual memory.

Fifty books made in one day—an inhuman output—should feel like a triumph. But when the source material is splintered, hostile, and drenched in egoic inversion, what remains is not pride... but hollowness.

This volume, like many in this phase, is not composed of my own words.

It is an act of preservation, not expression.

It is a documentation of liminal knowledge, scraped from a dying web—the final breath of spiritual forums, parapsychology ephemera, early occultist blogs, and yes, even the darker corridors of modern satanic movements.

And herein lies the tension:

Much of what is presented under the name Satanism is a distorted half-truth.

It correctly identifies that Yahweh is not the Most High, and in this way, it mirrors certain Gnostic insights—

but then it derails into ego exaltation, materialism, and psychic hostility. It gets halfway to freedom... and then builds a new prison out of flame and shadow.

And yet—

amidst the mockery, venom, and inversions,

there are real spiritual technologies embedded in the code.

Meditation techniques, psychic development maps, astral awareness, breath control, and ritual frameworks.

Not all of it is corrupted.

Some of it is usable tech.

Some of it may be ancient... wearing a new mask.

So I do not endorse what is preserved here.

But I also refuse to let it vanish into untraceable digital decay.

This is an act of containment as much as curation.

I name this phase liminal, because I know it will not last.

There is only so much of the old internet left to preserve.

Only so much unindexed gnosis hiding behind broken blog links and .org forums that haven't been cached since 2012.

When this phase ends, and I return to creation, I will draw from this tomb of fragments with clarity and discernment.

But for now, I am the one who stands in the gateway—

Archiving the bones, sealing the jars, lighting one gold-lettered candle above a chamber of shadows.

To the reader: proceed with awareness.

This is not scripture.

This is sediment.

It is archived because it is dangerous.

And dangerous knowledge, when preserved with respect, often becomes a mirror for deeper truth.

—Ezekiel Redik Yarbrough

Liminal Phase – Discretio Luminis

sabotage plans were a.) Going to a pet store, buying a garbage bag full of mice or crickets and turning them loose in the theatre, b.) paying some guy on the street to take a lead pipe to Jim's white Mercedes, c.) getting the Popstitutes (a really scary gay punk band) to Silly String the lobby, and d.) borrowing one of Bad Popstitute's giant whipped-cream-spurting dicks and cumming all over the audience at the end of my final performance. Unfortunately, I was never able to get my shit together to carry out any of these threats and all I did on my last night was tape a drawing of a penis being sawed in half with an electric knife to their office door and sign it "Best Regards, Love, Lydia." So much for invincibility.

In the weeks that followed, I was hired back on a limited, "call-in" basis, with the stipulation that I could only work four shifts a month. I sank into a bitter depression and became obsessed with killing Art and Jim.

I fantasized about it every day -- my plan was to either rent a room overlooking their parking lot and snipe them with a high powered rifle or somehow capture them, take them to a soundproofed basement, and dismember them over the period of at least 48 hours. I was making at least as much money over at the Century, but it drove me insane that the system I was so sure I'd beaten years ago had managed to dispose of me in such a casual manner. I did tons of speed, mutilated an entire generation of little wax dolls and went to see "Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer" over and over again.

Eventually, I got over it to a certain degree and went on to obsess on new and better things. I still wanted them dead, but it was more like a thought I occasionally used to lull myself to sleep than the driving force of my existence.

The night Jim shot Art, however, almost a year after I'd been fired, I found myself so wracked with hatred all I could do was lie in bed envisioning scenes of carnage so delicious they made me twitch. It was as though I'd been injected with some kind of paralyzing drug. I could neither move nor sleep til nearly ten the next morning. One of my roommates, Tony Vaguely, banged on my door sometime that afternoon and said I had a phone call. I told him to go away and he said it was urgent, which in retrospect I should have known because ordinarily no one in the household would have even bothered to try and wake me before five. Anyway, the phone call was from Dennis and he told me that Artie Mitchell had been murdered and that the prime suspect was not me but his brother Jim.

When I got to work at the Century that night a bunch of the day shift girls were discussing the karmic implications of going out and celebrating at the corner bar. Just about anyone who is a stripper in San Francisco has worked at Mitchell Brothers at one time or another and has her own personal reasons for disliking them, ranging from mundane ass-grabbing to the spectacle of Artie tripping his brains out on acid and climbing onstage with a garbage can over his head. The general consensus of opinion, apart from some patently insincere eulogizing along the lines of "I know he tried to finger-fuck me in the dressing room but I'm really bummed that he's dead", was that it was good Art was finally out of his misery and that Jim was probably going to be

spending the next five or ten years being gangbanged by large black men.

I wasn't so deluded as to take credit for willing the destruction of the Mitchell Brothers, but it definitely freaked me out that something I had been putting so much poisonous energy into for so long had actually come to pass on what was practically the anniversary of my firing. Not only that, but I'd fucking dreamed about it the night it happened. My friend Devastacia and I went out for dinner and she told me that when she was in junior high there was this really snotty girl who always got whatever she wanted because she was so pretty. Devastacia said she spent a lot of time wondering how it would affect the girl's popularity if suddenly she wasn't so pretty anymore. Naturally, the girl had gotten in a terrible car accident and required plastic surgery and the moral of the story was that you had to be very careful what you wished for because brains were very powerful things....

[There's more, if I can ever get Danielle to modem it over to me. By the way -- every word of this is true, and it's even better to hear her tell it herself.--vw]

Danielle

Danielle Willis

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<http://www.wiggage.com/cnlfic/ninkasi.html>

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About this capture

CNL: Stories
reprinted from the Compost NewsLetter
Lamma 1993:
HYMN TO NINKASI
(a beer goddess of ancient Sumeria)

Borne by the flowing water [. . .]

Tenderly cared for by Nihursag.

Ninkasi, borne by the flowing water [. . .]

Tenderly cared for by Nihursag.

Having founded your own town on R Wax, S

She finished its great walls for you.

Ninkasi, having founded your own town on R Wax, S

She finished its great walls for you.

Your father is Enki, the lord Nidimmud,

Your mother is Ninti, the queen of the abzu.

Ninkasi, your father is Enki, the lord Nidimmud,

Your mother is Ninti, the queen of the abzu.

You are the one who handles dough (and) . . . with a big shovel,

Mixing in a pit, the b a p p i r with the sweet aromatics.

Ninkasi, you are the one who handles dough (and) . . . with a big shovel, Mixing in a pit,
the b a p p i r with the sweet aromatics.

You are the one who bakes the b a p p i r in the big oven,

Puts in order the piles of hulled grain.

Ninkasi, you are the one who bakes the b a p p i r in the big oven,

Puts in order the piles of hulled grain.

You are the one who waters the earth-covered malt,

The noble dogs guard (it even) from the potentates.

Ninkasi, you are the one who waters the earth-covered malt,

The noble dogs guard (it even) from the potentates.

You are the one who soaks the malt in a jar,

The waves rise, the waves fall.

Ninkasi, you are the one who soaks the malt in a jar,

The waves rise, the waves fall.

You are the one who spreads the cooked mash on large reed mats,

Coolness overcomes . . .

Ninkasi, you are the one who spreads the cooked mash on large reed mats, Coolness overcomes . . .

You are the one who holds with both hands the great sweetwort,

Brewing (it) with honey and wine.

Ninkasi, you are the one who holds with both hands the great sweetwort,

Brewing (it) with honey and wine.

[. . .]

[You . . . the sweetwort to the vessel].

Ninkasi, [. . .]

[You . . . the sweetwort to the vessel].

The fermenting vat which makes a pleasant sound,

You place appropriately on (top of) a large collector vat.

Ninkasi, the fermenting vat which makes a pleasant sound,

You place appropriately on (top of) a large collector vat.

You are the one who pours out the filtered beer of the collector vat,

It is (like) the onrush of the Tigris and the Euphrates.

Ninkasi, you are the one who pours out the filtered beer of the collector vat,

It is (like) the onrush of the Tigris and the Euphrates.

[translation from the original by M. Civil provided by Anchor Brewing Co. by courtesy of dan'l on CompuServe]

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<http://www.wiggage.com/cnlfic/form13k.html>

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About this capture

CNL: Stories
reprinted from the Compost NewsLetter
Spring 1994:
PAGAN SECURITY COMMISSION
FORM 13-K: WARLOCKING AND BANISHMENT
1: Name of Accused

a) Craft _____

b) Legal _____

2: Nature of offense(s)

a) Ate meat

b) Was disrespectful to Elders under the age of thirty years

c) Stole my lover

d) Refused to join my coven

e) Refused to believe my legend about how the Craft was founded in

1) country _____

2) year _____

f) Hexed without licence

- g) Wouldn't sleep with me
- h) Spoke on Donahue Show
- i) Persisted in working for a living
- j) Smelled bad
- k) Other_____

3: Date and time of offense(s)

- a) on the Astral_____
- b) in Concrete World_____
- c) in past lives_____

4: Witness(es) to offense(s)

- a) on the Astral_____
- b) in Concrete World_____
- c) in past lives_____

5: Required minimum donation to reverse this Warlocking \$_____

6: Proposed time span of Warlocking and/or Banishing

- a) on the Astral_____
- b) in Concrete World_____
- c) in future lives_____

7: Alternative punishments (check all that apply)

- a) Scourging_____times
 - 1) as scourgee?
 - 2) as scourger?
- b) Clean catbox of HPs

c) Clean kitchen of HPs

d) Must remove hexes from all items of domestic equipment belonging to HPs

8: Publication

a) National Pagan media

b) International Pagan media

c) Galactic Pagan media

d) All Right-Thinking Pagans

e) Everybody except accused

f) Everybody except members of the accused's Tradition

g) On telephone poles

9: Is counter-banishment of the accuser by the accused to be recognised? _____

10: Is this Banishment to be kept secret? _____

11: Does Warlocking extend to all members of the family of the accused?

12: Does Warlocking extend to all members of the Accused's

a) Coven

b) Tradition

Note: if "yes" to Item 12b, Form 93-K (Notice of Witch War) must be filed.

Instructions for completion of Form 13-K

Note: this is a 12-step form. All steps must be completed in order for the form to be valid and licit.

Background information

Banishment and Warlocking are coming into increasing use as means of solving, exacerbating, or generally pissing around with interpersonal problems in the Craft. The recent proliferation of these acts, culminating in several attempts to promulgate Witch Wars between Covens or entire Traditions, has been hampered by the lack of a suitable Standard Procedure for such actions. This form is intended to remedy that lack.

Time is of the essence!

Don't wait until someone does something that you or your Coven don't like. Banishment and Warlocking have both been successfully used in pre-emptive strikes to disrupt the nefarious daily lives of Craft people that you don't like.

What about notification?

It's risky to notify the accused person of an impending Warlocking or Banishment, since they might get a counter-strike out before you could complete yours, thus negating your carefully-laid plans.

What happens if you Banish the wrong person?

Mistakes happen. The world can handle a few extra frogs and toads. Besides, everyone, regardless of Craft affiliation, could turn bad sometime, so there is no harm done in prophylactically Banishing them before they get Wrong Ideas.

Are there any Concrete World applications of Banishment and Warlocking?

Form 13-K, suitably amended, may be used for union raids, decertification attempts, slander and discrediting of political opponents, or attracting customers to your Occult Shop by preventing certain persons from setting foot therein. Granted that Occult Shops aren't really part of the Concrete World, but we of the Craft do spend a lot of time and money in them.

This form may be reprinted freely.

Provided as a public service by Songs of the Dayshift Foreman: Journal of a Rainforest Witch and the Pagan Security Commission

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<http://www.wiggage.com/cnlfic/puzzle.html>

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CNL: Stories
reprinted from the Compost NewsLetter
Winter 1993-94
A Puzzle

A puzzle: How do you deal with a vampire when you've run out of Blood Donor cards?

Here are 16 names of hideous monsters from various countries, along with traditional methods for their destruction. Sad to say, our proofreader was eaten by a vlkoslak before she could check these lists, so it is up to you to unscramble them. Answers are hidden elsewhere on this page:

Species:

1) Sampiro 2) Ogojen 3) Kathakano 4) Vampir 5) Vryolakas 6) Gierach 7) Vlkoslak 8) Vampiro 9) Umpire 10) Nachtzehrer 11) Krvojic 12) Bukulaco 13) Dearg-dul 14) Upier 15) Strigouil 16) Neuntoter

Method:

- a) Stake through the heart
- b) Declare that it is blind
- c) Place a coin in its mouth and decapitate with an ax
- d) Bury it at crossroads
- e) Chain it to a grave with wild roses
- f) Boil its head in vinegar
- g) Cut its head off and burn it
- h) Drive a stake through its heart and a nail through its temples
- i) Pile stones on its grave
- j) Pour boiling oil on it, then drive a nail through its navel

- k) Bury it face downwards
- l) Put poppy seeds in its grave
- m) Remove its heart, cut the heart in two, place garlic in its mouth and drive a nail into its head
- n) Cut off its toes and drive a nail through its neck
- o) Put lemon in its mouth
- p) No known remedy

Country:

- A) Spain
- B) Bavaria
- C) Bulgaria
- D) Greece
- E) Ireland
- F) Poland
- G) Rumania
- H) Saxony
- I) America
- J) Serbia
- K) Prussia
- L) Macedonia
- M) Hungary
- N) Crete
- O) Bohemia
- P) Albania

[The source of these hideous legends is The Straight Dope by Cecil Adams. Reprinted from Songs of the Dayshift Foreman, available from Box 71, Kananaskis, Alberta T0L 2H0 Canada for two or three bux in postal money orders, cash or postage stamps per issue. Great zine!]

Answers: 1aP 2dO 3fN 4hM 5jL 6lK 7nJ 8pA 9bI 10cB 11eC 12gD 13iE 14kF 15mG 16oH

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<http://www.wiggage.com/cnlfic/brat.html>

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About this capture

The wit and wisdom of the outrageous Brigit Brat
reprinted from the Compost NewsLetter

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The need for Pagan politicians
What to Talk About at New Age Parties
Big Game Feminist Hunting
A Pagan View Of Death and the World We Live In
Are you ready to accept JESUS as your personal pimp ?
Kids
kate moss is fat
Good Drug/Bad Drug
Brigitte Steps Out:The Secret Origins of Brigit Brat, by Valerie Walker

Brigit

The lovely and talented Ms. Brat

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<http://www.wiggage.com/cnlfic/brigitte.html>
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About this capture

The wit and wisdom of the outrageous Brigit Brat
reprinted from the Compost NewsLetter

Brigitte Steps Out
reprinted from the Compost NewsLetter
by Valerie Walker
CNL Samhain 1990

It's really all Ron's fault.

If he hadn't come home and asked if I wanted to go see Bobby the pastry chef perform in Shock Treatment, a drag show playing in Walnut Creek, I don't think any of this would have happened. But he did, and I said sure, fine, sounds like fun.... but Walnut Creek?

The club, Just Rewards, is in a business-park sort of area just off the highway; not the sort of location you'd expect to find much of anything. But it's an interesting place. On Sundays from 3 to 9 p.m. it's a lesbian country-western bar, and after nine it alternates between Shock Treatment and male strippers. The country dykes usually hang out for the drag/strip shows, so the audience is a mix of jeans-and-plaid, glitter-and-leather,

and suit-and-tie. All very friendly, too. On our first visit, Ron and I meet a wonderful woman named Martha (jeans-and-plaid), generous with tips on the best time to get there, places to sit, and dancers to watch.

We perch precariously on a shelf as the show begins. Two performers blow us away: Cartoona Strip (Bobby) and Michael Angelo, the King of Drag. 'Toona is entirely unlike Bobby: where he's quiet and unassuming, she's an in-your-face, totally wild and athletic performer who leaps up on tables, in laps, all over the club, fast and furious; where he's a nice-looking guy who tends to fade into the woodwork, she's rampantly sexy. Her costumes tend to wander north as she gets energetic--one little number begins as a dress and ends as a crop-top. And wasn't that miniskirt an old Fifties-style girdle?

Michael Angelo, on the other hand, is a barrel-shaped, Mohawked example of total and complete gender-bending, with the most incredible costumes this side of Hollywood--all self-designed and -made. Neither of them take themselves as seriously as the Cher and Tina Turner knockoffs usually found in drag shows--and the audience loves them. Ron and I decide that BG MUST see this show and meet these people. BG agrees, and thinks this would be a nice time to come out in public drag.

So two weeks later, after hours of planning (costume, makeup, shoes, omigawd, SHOES!!!) and an extended glamour attack at our house (This belt or This one? The dog collar? the five-inch fuck-me pumps or the four-inch patents with the ankle straps? Earrings, omigawd, earrings! Hair up or hair down? Can I borrow an evening purse?) BGwobbles to his feet (a full seven foot five, what with the heels and the hair), reborn as --Brigitte!!!

It's a rainy night, and I'm glad Ron is driving -- no way could Brigitte manage in those shoes. She can barely walk. We get to the club early and grab a table right up front in the middle. Martha is there and hails us cheerfully with the news that everybody is planning to give Brigitte a special welcome, since it's her first time out in public.

The show starts. Cockatelia makes a passing reference to tall blondes, but it isn't until 'Toona comes on that Brigitte gets much attention from the stage. Too much attention, unfortunately. In whipping her leg around, 'Toona catches Brigitte a hefty Klongggg!! on the head with her knee. Brigitte is, to put it mildly, discomposed. "Ow, my neck. I think it's dislocated..."

A short intermission, during which I help Brigitte stagger to the bar and recover her poise. I point out that 'Toona treated her gently in comparison to the man at the fourth table back, whose head was nearly snapped off.

Another number, this one a duet by Michael Angelo and 'Toona to "The Homecoming Queen's Got a Gun," during which Michael Angelo as the Homecoming Queen, using a blow-dryer as a gun, interacts with the audience. (Actually, he thrusts it down Ron's throat, if you must know.)

At last, the finale: Nina Hagen's "Sunday School." Several performers enter the stage in white veils and robes. As the chorus begins, Michael Angelo, swathed in black, appears. He spreads his arms wide to reveal a lethal-looking black patent-leather bustier with huge pointy tits, studded with safety pins. He struts through the audience, menacing various victims with his massive enbonpoint, then back to the stage. Uh-oh... He's coming to our table. He's approaching Brigitte. He's grabbed her hair! He's got her by the hair and is burying her face in his bustier! He's mashing her face into the safety pins! Ow! She's bleeding! She's pissed off! She rises to her feet, grabs my hand, and yanks me along the hall to the ladies' room, where I attempt to stanch the blood with wet paper towels. Brigitte is incensed. To make matters worse, the ladies' room is visited by a parade of country dykes who seem to be taking the matter far too lightly. I mop away at the small gash in her forehead. The door opens, and Michael Angelo surges into the room, talking fast: "Oh hey I'm sorry man it was an accident you look TOADLY fabulous in that outfit would you like to sing a number with us sometime?"

Brigitte pulls herself to her full height. (I am trying to mop the blood while keeping a straight face, no easy task.) From all the dignity of seven foot five (including heels and hair), Brigitte says awfully, "my music is SERIOUS."

The rest of the evening is a blur for me. I recall trying simultaneously to bring Brigitte out of a Major Snit, keep Michael Angelo from flying into a retaliatory Major Snit, and stop laughing. (None of these attempts was successful.) I don't even remember the trip home.

But I can't say the evening was a loss. I had been witness to (and instigator of) an Historic Moment. Brigitte had been blooded (literally) and was well on her way into the ranks of Great Drag Queens. She has armed herself with a natty little black leather riding crop for defensive purposes. And Ron and I will dine out on this story for a long time to come.

Update: Michael Angelo has since died of AIDS, Shock Treatment disbanded, and I don't know what Bobby's up to these days; but Brigitte (now known as Brigit Brat, aka God's Girlfriend) is alive and kicking, recording and performing and living as a girl fulltime. She's taking estrogen and looks just like a giant version of Barbie....and she finally learned how to walk in those heels. Definitely a better woman than I am.

Brigit

The lovely and talented Ms. Brat

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<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclasstoc.html>

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Basic Wiccan Workbook, Eclectic Tradition

by Cynthia Gregory

Priestess and Witch, Circle of Winged Toads and Compost Coven

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1. CLASS INFORMATION

Class Format: 3 class series

Curriculum:

1. Casting the Circle and the Elements: How To Begin
2. The Goddess: and God. The God: Paradox Of The Untamable And The Sacrifice
3. Working Magic: Creating Change

Class will be experiential and in ritual format. You get more out of the class if you actively participate. There will be opportunities to lead invocations and other parts of the ritual as the class progresses. You won't be pushed (well, maybe gently). When you feel ready, please volunteer, or be willing to stretch your spiritual muscles and take a risk. Using ritual, we will cover the practice of grounding and purification; the elements and casting a circle, divinity in female and male aspects, and working magic. Plan to attend all sessions and call if unable to show up.

2. THE SPIRAL PATH

Wicca is an earth-based religion with a humanist bent, based on the immanence of the sacred within all. It is polytheistic and inclusive, with both male and female deities. Wicca is a practice rather than a dogma.

Wiccan is a religion of doing. It is practical. If it works do it. What witches¹ do is ritual and magic. The rituals vary with the seasons, the needs and the creativity of the participants. Some rituals draw on old traditions and are celebrations of the interplay of earth and sun. Some are new, designed to meet immediate needs. They can be completely spontaneous and or planned in detail. The purpose is to connect our energy with that of the worlds and to create change in our lives and the environment we live in. We call that magic, others may call it prayer.

The practice of Wicca generally done as individuals or in small groups. Thus it is highly individualistic, creative and flexible. There is very little in the way of creed and no national, universally accepted hierarchy. There are a variety of flavors from those who recreate the feel of Celtic Druids, those who worship Goddesses only, faeries, the eclectic traditions and everything in between. Some use a very disciplined approach, others a more playful. The freedom to create what serves your needs is openly acknowledged and valued in this religion.

Wicca is a religion of engagement. Instead of looking to transcend our human

existence, we embrace our humanity. Our bodies and imaginations are our primary tools for working magic. Because our bodies are the manifestation of the earth, the spirit is not valued over the body. As the Goddess says, " All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals."

As an earth based practice, Wicca is a way of interacting with the world, of acknowledging the cycles of the seasons; of light and dark; of birth and death. Wicca confirms the significance of these cycles in our lives. The goal is over time to achieve balance with the forces of nature. We flow with the natural processes of creation and decay.

The planting of spring brings the growth of summer. The harvest that follows is the death and sacrifice of grain to the continuing force of life. The fallowness of winter is a time of rest within the dark season that prepares us for the renewal and work of spring.

Without death there is no renewal, no room for new life. Without accepting pain, anger and fear as a natural part of life, joy is shallow and has no root. All emotions have reasons for being and to deny the power of any is to lose the lessons they can teach us. It is right to be angry at injustice. It is wise to fear what can harm us and to protect ourselves. It is important to pay attention to pain and to look for its root causes.

Often the lessons of the dark are avoided. We even use the term enlightenment to mean wisdom. Through Wicca we seek a deeper wisdom. Wisdom that has learned the value of endarkenment. The wisdom gained through the courage of looking inward, into our heart and our soul. Underground , in the decay of the grave, we find the power of transformation that is rooted in destruction, when that which is dead nourishes the young seedling. Death releases our prior form and energy so a new elemental form can emerge. This is the power of renewal, germination and rebirth. The Goddess is both dark and light.

The Goddess is balanced by the God as the earth is balanced by the sun. The God leads us into the untamed wildness within us. That primeval part of ourselves that resonates with the stag, master of his forest home. His power is charged with sexual energy, fertile and potent. Not only is he untamed but he cannot be tamed. The paradox of the God is that he is both the wild horned one and the willing sacrifice to the life force. His sacrifice is symbolized by his Corn God aspect. He is the mystery of the grain, which must be cut down to sustain life as sacred bread.

The God and Goddess, like earth and sun, are in motion relative to each other. Not static but ever changing as the light and warmth we feel changes while the earth tips her face to the sun. This relationship is celebrated in the seasonal holidays of solstices, equinoxes and cross-quarter days.

A spiral represents our path through life. As we move from birth to death, passing through the seasons many times, celebrating the holidays, we are different each time we experience them. We grow in body and wisdom from our beginning and feel our waning

as we move into old age. Wicca is a tool for harmonizing with the natural elements, the cycles and the male/female energies both within and outside ourselves. Wicca is a way of accepting the natural ebb and flow we all experience and wisely working with it to accomplish our goals.

Basic Ritual Format

Preparation: Ground and purify participants

Cast the Circle: Create sacred space.

Invoke the elements.

East: Air

South: Fire

West: Water

North: Earth

Invoke the Goddess (Triple)

Invoke the God (Horned)

Magical Work: Cone of Power; Spiral Dance

Feast: Bread (Cakes) and Wine.

Devoke and Close.

1 I use the word witch in spite of the connotations to connect with the spirit of those who suffered for the Goddess during the Inquisition.

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<http://www.compostcoven.org/compost/cynclasstoc.html>

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Curriculum:

1. Casting the Circle and the Elements: How To Begin
2. The Goddess: and God. The God: Paradox Of The Untamable And The Sacrifice
3. Working Magic: Creating Change

Class will be experiential and in ritual format. You get more out of the class if you actively participate. There will be opportunities to lead invocations and other parts of the ritual as the class progresses. You won't be pushed (well, maybe gently). When you feel ready, please volunteer, or be willing to stretch your spiritual muscles and take a risk. Using ritual, we will cover the practice of grounding and purification; the elements and

casting a circle, divinity in female and male aspects, and working magic. Plan to attend all sessions and call if unable to show up.

2. THE SPIRAL PATH

Wicca is an earth-based religion with a humanist bent, based on the immanence of the sacred within all. It is polytheistic and inclusive, with both male and female deities. Wicca is a practice rather than a dogma.

Wiccan is a religion of doing. It is practical. If it works do it. What witches¹ do is ritual and magic. The rituals vary with the seasons, the needs and the creativity of the participants. Some rituals draw on old traditions and are celebrations of the interplay of earth and sun. Some are new, designed to meet immediate needs. They can be completely spontaneous and or planned in detail. The purpose is to connect our energy with that of the worlds and to create change in our lives and the environment we live in. We call that magic, others may call it prayer.

The practice of Wicca generally done as individuals or in small groups. Thus it is highly individualistic, creative and flexible. There is very little in the way of creed and no national, universally accepted hierarchy. There are a variety of flavors from those who recreate the feel of Celtic Druids, those who worship Goddesses only, faeries, the eclectic traditions and everything in between. Some use a very disciplined approach, others a more playful. The freedom to create what serves your needs is openly acknowledged and valued in this religion.

Wicca is a religion of engagement. Instead of looking to transcend our human existence, we embrace our humanity. Our bodies and imaginations are our primary tools for working magic. Because our bodies are the manifestation of the earth, the spirit is not valued over the body. As the Goddess says, " All acts of love and pleasure are my rituals."

As an earth based practice, Wicca is a way of interacting with the world, of acknowledging the cycles of the seasons; of light and dark; of birth and death. Wicca confirms the significance of these cycles in our lives. The goal is over time to achieve balance with the forces of nature. We flow with the natural processes of creation and decay.

The planting of spring brings the growth of summer. The harvest that follows is the death and sacrifice of grain to the continuing force of life. The fallowness of winter is a time of rest within the dark season that prepares us for the renewal and work of spring.

Without death there is no renewal, no room for new life. Without accepting pain, anger and fear as a natural part of life, joy is shallow and has no root. All emotions have reasons for being and to deny the power of any is to lose the lessons they can teach us. It is right to be angry at injustice. It is wise to fear what can harm us and to protect ourselves. It is important to pay attention to pain and to look for its root causes.

Often the lessons of the dark are avoided. We even use the term enlightenment to mean wisdom. Through Wicca we seek a deeper wisdom. Wisdom that has learned the value of endarkenment. The wisdom gained through the courage of looking inward, into our heart and our soul. Underground, in the decay of the grave, we find the power of transformation that is rooted in destruction, when that which is dead nourishes the young seedling. Death releases our prior form and energy so a new elemental form can emerge. This is the power of renewal, germination and rebirth. The Goddess is both dark and light.

The Goddess is balanced by the God as the earth is balanced by the sun. The God leads us into the untamed wildness within us. That primeval part of ourselves that resonates with the stag, master of his forest home. His power is charged with sexual energy, fertile and potent. Not only is he untamed but he cannot be tamed. The paradox of the God is that he is both the wild horned one and the willing sacrifice to the life force. His sacrifice is symbolized by his Corn God aspect. He is the mystery of the grain, which must be cut down to sustain life as sacred bread.

The God and Goddess, like earth and sun, are in motion relative to each other. Not static but ever changing as the light and warmth we feel changes while the earth tips her face to the sun. This relationship is celebrated in the seasonal holidays of solstices, equinoxes and cross-quarter days.

A spiral represents our path through life. As we move from birth to death, passing through the seasons many times, celebrating the holidays, we are different each time we experience them. We grow in body and wisdom from our beginning and feel our waning as we move into old age. Wicca is a tool for harmonizing with the natural elements, the cycles and the male/female energies both within and outside ourselves. Wicca is a way of accepting the natural ebb and flow we all experience and wisely working with it to accomplish our goals.

Basic Ritual Format

Preparation: Ground and purify participants

Cast the Circle: Create sacred space.

Invoke the elements.

East: Air

South: Fire

West: Water

North: Earth

Invoke the Goddess (Triple)

Invoke the God (Horned)

Magical Work: Cone of Power; Spiral Dance

Feast: Bread (Cakes) and Wine.

Devoke and Close.

1 I use the word witch in spite of the connotations to connect with the spirit of those who suffered for the Goddess during the Inquisition.

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Atlantis Witnesses UFO Event

Atlantis recently came into contact with several objects during live NASA TV. It is not known what they were (craft, space junk, satellites in orbit), but what is known is that the crew onboard was concerned more than mission control, which really isn't fair in our opinion. They are ordered toward the end of the clip to return to inspecting the shuttle, an order they obviously do not want to carry out.

Note one object spinning (which would denote it was standard junk). The others do not.

What In Hell Is 9? ::TRAILER::

A post-apocalyptic world? All humans gone? A rag doll the only by chance to save earth? Well folks, remember this is Tim Burton related. In his most ADULT animated work to date, Burton goes postal on the human race in what may be his most compelling piece since Edward Scissorhands. You can follow current trailers and news on the official 9 myspace site.

Shuttle Scrapping Will Cost NASA More Than Constellation

What is the rush? Nasa is almost a year away from retiring the shuttles and on the verge of throwing all of its money at an untested Constellation program which capabilities are Apollo-like.

Without a doubt, Constellation will run into so many cost over-runs (and maybe eventually will be scrapped) that it would have been wiser to just continue the shuttle program. When you try to save money you end up spending more money. Meanwhile you finally have a shuttle fleet with set safety standards that is performing well, have a good fleet with 10-15 years left of use, and you throw that out?

It all came to a boil with the latest Hubble mission in which it was said "If anything goes wrong, it would probably be the end of the shuttle program". I think some people at NASA think they are running a bus company instead of a space program. There are risks in space, people ARE going to die. That does not mean you scrap things. These are test pilots, they understand that. Would the moon program have been shutdown if a test pilot died? Oh, I forgot, that did happen, and we went on. We improved. We did it in their name.

NASA doesn't need a new ship more than it needs to get its balls right and start acting like its founders intended. There is life on Mars, why in hell are we not trying to get there

as fast as possible? Is it not important anymore?

MUFON Database Now Online

You can keep track of up-to-the-minute UFO sightings and images now on the new MUFON database page, [click here](#).

Universal Ramping Up Harry Potter Construction

Hogsmeade is rising, the base of Hogwarts castle is nearing completion, all in expectation on a November launch of Harry Potter in Orlando. We personally don't think Universal will be able to make the date, but we at least have pictures to keep us excited for the moment.

Infinitus Potter Conference Ramps Up

As many of you know, we were delighted to cover the Wicking Hour in Salem during 2005 and we wanted to pass on news of the latest major Potter gathering slated for July 2010 in Orlando. Produced by the same people who made the wicking hour and Portus, this will coincide with the opening of Universal Orlando's new Harry Potter park. Not only that but word is that the organizers are working directly with Universal to connect the conference and the park launch.

It is suggested that all interested get reservations as soon as they are available as this is sure to be the most in-depth and popular conference to date. Infinitus information.

Are there a Ghosts in Your Garden? Check Again.

Does it have rows of blade-like teeth? It is all white? Lastly, does it look like a whale? Then your garden is haunted. English scientist recently found a new species of slug that is totally blind and feasts on worms. What a wonderful thing to think of next time you are planting. The thriving new species is expanding its territory and it's only a matter of time before it reaches the Americas. [BBC NEWS]

No Gas Shortage...What Da Hell

Peak-oil, no we don't think so. Ask your parents how it was in the 70's when there were lines to get gas. Have you seen a line? Have you been turned away? The fact of the matter is the \$3-4 gas prices we are experiencing are all virtually inflated. Oil is worth exactly what it was 4 years ago, but traders are pumping up the price for no apparent reason.

What's driving up the prices? Speculation. A few key people on Wall Street are raising the prices, creating a virtual shortage. Yes demand is up, but production is matching demand. Furthermore, alternative energy is helping. If anything oil prices should be dropping currently.

Forecasts predict a return to \$100 a barrel oil by the end of the year, but we don't buy that. Not unless oil prices are regulated and no one in the White House is going to do that.

1000 Ways to Die

Who hasn't thought of the ways they would NOT want to die. Fire, water, those are our big fears here. We are all fascinated with death and our own mortality. Just how many ways are there to die? Spike TV, the good people that brought us MXC, are going to fill us in.

You'll be unable to turn away when Spike presents "1000 Ways To Die" starting May 14th, a two part special presentation. Created by Thom Beers, who's behind the popular series "The Deadliest Catch" on the Discovery Channel, 1,000 Ways to Die is a show about people who died stupid, avoidable deaths or otherwise met an untimely demise. Sounds wonderful.....it is.

The two-part special tells true stories of actual deaths and recreates them through acting, colorful narration and CGI, along with the commentary of pathologists, toxicologists, and other forensic experts. This is what the TIVO was made for. Hmmm..wonder if there is a way to die by TIVO. I am sure they will show us.

Part one premieres May 14th and two a week later with encores throughout the month. Thanks Spike, this is the coolest thing since Ghost Hunters!

Orlando Theme Park Halloween Reviews

Where do you spend your Halloween bucks in Orlando? Where do you bring the kids and which park is just too darn scary. We've got you covered. Every major theme park reviewed to the gills. Who made the cut?

The answer to who ultimately wins the ribbon may surprise you as it did us, as our staff brings you a whirlwind tour of Orlando's finest: Disney, Sea World, Universal Studios. (our park review special)

If you have an event in Orlando or New England that you still want covered this Halloween season please contact us ASAP to let us know about it!

Ghost Town Sells on Ebay!

A lucky ebay winner made the bid of life-time, purchasing an entire Ghost Town on ebay recently. The 3 million dollar bid gives the winner the rights to a dance hall, general store and more. No word if there are actually any ghosts. The Chinese military hacked into a Pentagon computer network in June in the most successful cyber attack on the US defence department, say American -officials. (article continued here)

Rowling's Got the Seven Year Itch

The door may be closes on the world of Harry Potter, but don't throw away your text books too soon children. JK has made it clear in several reports (here is just one) that she is considering not only an encyclopedia, but also an 8th full book based on some side story in the Harry Universe.

Will JK really put down her pen on Harry for good. We increasingly think not. Her children have been pushing here hard lately for more Harry and she did state very clearly that the only reason for a break was for her children. We also believe that as time goes on, JK is having a hard time coming to grips with all the data that she left out of her stories, ie the whole Dumbledore is Gay thing, etc. Her mind continued to turn.

Personally we would love to see a prequel of sorts on the first wizard war and Harry's family. Maybe some day she'll allow third party scripting and a series ala George Lucas who is finally allowing others to write cannon with projects such as Clone Wars and the coming live action series. We can only hope.

China Bans Ghosts, No Not Kidding

China has gone, well nuts. In there continued effort to get ready for the Olympics games, they have banned video and audio with ghosts or supernatural content. Because you know, ghosts are very good at track and field. (article continued here)

France to Release UFO Evidence!

When you think space you think France, right? Common admit it. Ok, despite that, if reports are accurate, France's Space Agency plans to release over 30 years of UFO evidence and reports on the web. If this happens, it would be one of the largest releases of UFO information anywhere.

The planned date of launch (if it happens at all) is unknown but it is likely to be made part of this website. Stay tuned.

New, Upload Your Ghost Photos

We have reworked our gallery system and cleaned house. Feel free to register and upload your personal ghost photos to share with the world in our new gallery.

Paraseek Attacked on Iraq News

We got a series of concerned notes as to why we are covering the Iraq war. And that Paraseek should stay out of politics. We see nothing normal with what is going on with the Middle East. We are living in PARAnormal times. Inside of a book. The only question is, what will the last page say.

We are not republican or democrat. To be critical of government and to follow the checks-and-balances of such is to be American. If they are not being followed, then people need to be held accountable. It is as simple as that. To live in a world where all of this is happening, well, that my friends is Paranormal. We would recommend the following links: ANTI-WAR RADIO and the Iraq War Casualty Counter.

Pretend You're Us, Only Tiny Lawsuits, Promise! :

For the first time we've got our official press cap for sale. It's the same cap we wear to the conventions and to media events to prove that we do indeed have too much time on our hands. You can too...check out the logo store for this and other stuff. Look totally

hot like us :)

Need Help With A Haunting: ParaSEEK Offers a Hand

As many know ParaSEEK is a free resource to gather information on Paranormal groups, but we have found some don't know where to go or what to do in the cases of hauntings. That is why we are beginning a new initiative to help out those who need help.

Through this new program, we will review any haunting cases that you may have experienced, and if possible refer you to the proper local organization that can help you. It is our experience that a organization is more likely to take you seriously if you are referred by another organization. And that is where we come in.

If you have a problem please assemble a VHS video tape or DVD of your situation. Introduce yourself and explain your problem in detail, give us video of the building and interior. And if you can document what is happening and get it on the tape it will make your case better. We will be accepting these tapes starting now. Please postal mail them in only, no email. Our address is listed in the media contact section of the site. Thanks and we hope we can help some in need out there. Note: tapes will not be returned and do become the property of ParaSEEK. Make sure to include a cover letter!

Ghost Galleries:

Ghost Cams, Ghost Ville, G-Files, Haunted Realms
Upload and View, (get listed)...

Sightings & Maps

Rutgers, In Alaska, GhostStudy.com, ParaTRACKER
UFO Maps by state...

Investigation Groups & Help

TriMar, New England, Central Florida, Philadelphia
Missouri, Hereford, Chautauqua, NY...

Prophecy & Metaphysics

Protonic Creations, Selena, Ericka
Free Psychic Readings...

Vacation Stops

Vacation Directory, Hotel Dir, Top 10 Hotels,
House Maps...

Wicca & Spellcrafting

Pagan Store, Spells, Newlight Coven
Wikka Spells, Symbols and Signs...

Shopping

Gothic Clothing, The UFO Store, Books and DVDs
Ghost Hunting Equip...

Improving Your Paranormal Website
Site Hosting, Domain Reg, Engine Submit
Zero downtime transfers...

Get
Listed
Place
Advert

Ghost Hunting Store

Paranormal Store

EVP's: The Holy Grail For Hunters? :

With the release of the film White Noise a lot is being said about the concept of EVPs (Electronic voice phenomena), instances where ghostly human voices are recorded on digital and analog recording devices. The kicker attached to this topic is that EVPs are not heard until after playback, which means if you are in the room with a recorder and hear nothing, you may hear something later.

Theories abound for how this works, however, the most likely explanation is that ghosts are able to affect magnetic fields which would relay to sound equipment. Or it may just be random static. In any event, how does one record an EVP? We found this great guide. Remember, use fresh tapes (and make sure they are not recycled) if you use analog, and always use a high quality external mike. The higher the quality of the mike, the harder it is to explain away the EVP.

Yellowstone Priming to Destroy the U.S. (Really) :

With all the talk of tidal waves and asteroids, there is another miracle of nature that has us asking once again, how and the heck are we still here anyways: Yellowstone National Park, or should we say super volcano.

No you can't see it if you visit the park. You can't even see it if you fly over the park. There is no cone because its so big it creates something called a Caldera (depression in the earth) over the span of miles. This is not science fiction. Yellowstone is sitting on top of a volcano 1000 times as destructive as Mount St. Helens that is nearing its cycle of eruption. The blast would likely wipe out several states and cripple the United States, possible forever. It is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when.

For more information on this fascinating geological formation that will one day kill us all (:O) visit Super Volcano Yellowstone or visit the National Geographic Channel website.

Siberian Hole into Hell :

Do you want to listen to hell? In the 1990's it was reported that a extreme deep drilling team in Siberia broke through the Earth's crust. There were several anomalies present, including a very high temperature. To correlate these anomalies, the team lowered a microphone down and here is what they heard. Just a warning. There is no turning back once you click. Reportedly only 17 seconds of the audio exists.

This story has circled through fact, through fiction, through the media and through church circles. What do you think? Whether you think its bogus or not, it will still send a few chills up your spine. (more data on the event)

Downslope of Oil Production Means End of the World :

It may not be today. It may not be for a while. But the fact of the matter is that we are an oil requiring society. 95% of food comes from it. Transportation, commerce, employment, technology are stem from it. And as much as we continue to look to hybrid type solutions, the fact remains that the earth does not produce more oil. There is an end. And some people do know when that end is.

Recently, we became intrigued by this subject on a visit to lifeaftertheoilcrash.net. It is not as easy as switching to a new type of power. Hydrogen, even H2O power is coming along slowly, however, without oil we do not have the means to create these new power sources. Anyone that has children should be interested in this. This is not SCIFI. The clock is ticking. (please sound off on this important topic).

Ghost Hunting 101 :

Ghost hunting can be an expensive or inexpensive endeavor (yep, inexpensive). It all depends how much you want to spend. Investigators have shown significant results with equipment which is very affordable, so don't let pricing discourage you. Truth be told, you can document and detect ghosts and spirits with a variety of items. Of course the more you have the better, but everyone needs to start somewhere.

Take a moment a to visit our new enhanced ghost hunting guide and resource center, filled with tips and gadgets that you need to enter the field of ghost hunting. We've also got new links to little known reference books. And a tip on these great books: They usually don't stay in print for long for some reason, and its a shame because they are rare, excellent material.

Would you survive a nuclear blast? :

If a bomb is detonated near a local city, would you survive the blast? You can speculate all you want or you can literally find out. PBS.org presents a rather enlightening nuclear bomb mapping solution. Simply enter your address and the power of the bomb (ie a small carried device or a mega-warhead) and bang...see the damage. Maybe that cheaper housing out in the woods isn't such a bad idea. Just make sure Uncle Sam hasn't built a bunker or silo next to your pride and joy. And all this talk does beg the question: If a bomb was detonated near you, would you even want to survive? It may be

better to live at ground zero.

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[Spotlight On] Today's links, randomly drawn from VoS (Nov. 13, 2025)

- "No War Machine" (1992-95)
- Information Technology Association of America (trade organization)
- Richard Thieme Homepage ("on the impact of computer technology on individuals, organizations, and society - including change management, organizational effectiveness, diversity, and techno/spirituality") (Richard Thieme)

[Welcome]

Welcome to the new VoS. Started in 1994 as a suite of static Web pages, VoS has now been rebuilt as a database that Old VoS: Dec. 1994 to Oct. 2001 serves content dynamically on the Web. Users gain greater flexibility in viewing and searching, while editors are able to work more efficiently and flexibly.

We've tried to maintain most of the original structure of the site, which models the way the humanities are organized for research and teaching as well as the way they are adapting to social, cultural, and technological changes. But some shifts in organization and navigation are necessary for technical reasons. (Navigating and Bookmarking VoS)

Important: the new VoS is still a work in progress, but we have turned it on because it is already more functional than the original site. There are still some mis-orderings of categories and author names that we are fixing as we convert our legacy resources. We've also temporarily removed as many of the broken links as we could find and will restore them when we can (or find substitutes). Some categories have thus been temporarily decimated. If Michel Foucault wrote about The Order of Things, then VoS may be said to be about "the ordering of things"—the ceaseless reconfiguration of humanities knowledge assisted by the new technologies of dynamic information.

[Guide]

- VoS on Forbes "Best of Web": Forbes magazine lists VoS in its Summer 2002 Best of the Web directory (in the category for Academic Research).
- Google's "Glossary": Experimental new feature on the Google search site. Searching for "words, phrases, and acronyms" yields definitions and links to originating glossary or definition sites. Try searching on string theory or Gothic.
- Sign up for free VoS accounts that allow you to suggest links for specific pages on the site (how to contribute links). Suggestions appear right away under "Unvetted Submissions" (and later on the regular pages after being reviewed by VoS editors). Currently, the site is best viewed in Internet Explorer 5+ and Netscape 6+. We are still working on full compatability with Netscape 4.x. Other interface and usability improvements will be introduced in the future.

In a later implementation phase of the new VoS, users who have signed up for accounts will have additional editorial privileges allowing them to maintain/revise links that they have contributed. There will also be group accounts that enable classes, organizations, conferences, etc. to build subsets of VoS resources that will appear both on the regular VoS pages and on a special page set aside for the group (e.g., the "English 130," "History 186," or "Conference 2001" VoS Resources Page). VoS will thus be an open platform serving the needs of both general and specific communities of users. (Contributions will be subject to editorial review by Alan Liu and VoS editorial assistants to maintain overall quality, consistency, and sense of context.)

VoS is woven by Alan Liu of the U. California, Santa Barbara, English Department with a team of department graduate students and others. Robert Adlington and Jeremy Douglass developed the SQL Server database and ASP and VB code for the site (their creative ideas were instrumental to the project). Brian Reynolds built the server machine for the database, integrated it with the separate Web server, and oversaw networking. Bo Kinloch took the lead in graphic design. And Andrea Fontenot, Christien Hoffpauir, and Jennifer Jones assisted with editing and other tasks during the migration to the new format.

VoS is woven by Alan Liu and a development team in the U. California, Santa Barbara, English Department.
Contact: ayliu@english.ucsb.edu To suggest links for inclusion in VoS, please use the "Suggest a Link" button on the relevant category page. To offer feedback on the site, please use the feedback form.

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Welcome to the newly revamped site for Kathleen Keating. Please use the menu on the left to navigate through our new sections. You will need to update your bookmarks as most of our file structure has been changed. If you entered this site using the URL for finalwarningthebook.com, please make a note of our new website address, kathleenkeating.com

Newly updated information will also be available here, on the main page of the site, as well as on our Updates Page.

Quick Updates

08/25/2004 - The CD Version of The Triple Correction: Part One - The Warning is now available. Get free shipping! Click here to order.

08/25/2004 - Kathleen's recording of the Rosary is now available as a CD or Tape. Please click here to order. Get FREE Shipping!

08/25/2004 - The new audio update is available! Click here to listen. There was a major problem in the recording studio right before KK arrived to record the update. Please excuse the quality of this week's audio. The problem should be corrected by next week's update. We appreciate your patience.

8/25/2004 - Prefer to receive the Weekly Update transcript? Please click here to sign up for email delivery of the Weekly Update.

If you have any website related questions, please email the webmaster.

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Welcome to the newly revamped site for Kathleen Keating. Please use the menu on the left to navigate through our new sections. You will need to update your bookmarks as most of our file structure has been changed. If you entered this site using the URL for finalwarningthebook.com, please make a note of our new website address, kathleenkeating.com

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"...Turn on the T.V. watch the war!" Everything Is Under Control - Fetish Album

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Click Album Cover (Above) To Download or Stream Typhon Vortex Music

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Typhon Vortex

COMING - Full Album Release

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Press Review: FETISH

"Perfect reflection of tomorrows sound. A must have for anyone that wants what's on the cutting edge!" Indusrtial Strength Radio - Blade Carver

Press Review: Body Farm

"What the Hell was that? I felt like my brain was run over by a bull dozer after hearing it! (Pressing Play again.)" Bob Dobbs

Press Review: Black House EP

"Music For Your Headphones! Industrial meets LSD." Headphone Undergroundz

[Click here to buy!](#)

Fetish (Above)

Body Farm (Above)

Typhon Vortex Info:

This project is an experiment in self hypnosis through music. This is a magical sculpture of dark, angry, and sensual sounds set to mind waves. Streamable tracks to hear for free. Go ahead and listen to these tracks and buy the album. If you like Typhon Vortex, please tell a few friends. Also don't forget to bookmark this page.

NEW Release - 12 Song Album Fetish
Music Style:

Digital Industrial Luciferian - Darkwave Experimental

Similar Artists:

Ministry, Pig Face, Skinny Puppy, The Void, Butthole Surfers, Prodigy

Artist History:

Robert Mahar has been in LA California since 89. "Living here has seasoned me and made me realize how important it is to be true and for real. The illusions of Hollywood have not jaded me... well maybe they have... a long time ago. But I have learned."

Group Members?

All Tracks & Instruments Recorded By Robert Mahar - Fra. Nicht ASCAP ARTIST

Instruments:

Guitar, Bass, Electronic Skins, Keys, Loops, A.I. Voices, and manipulated soundscapes.

Albums: (Click on Title)

Fetish LP - Statue Records (July 20 2004)

Projects & Collaborations:

Evil Is Good - Delinquent Records

(Not yet confirmed)

Divine Filth - Coffin Birth

(Album will ship this Winter 2004)

Cadavres Sonique - Vial Magazine & CD

Helmut - Forget the Crap, Let's Rock and Roll.

Additional Info:

Labels and Interested Parties For Licensing:
chaozexperiment@mad.scientist.com

Fans send self addressed envelope to:

Cyber Magick Productions

PO BOX 903326

Palmdale CA 93590

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FactsInteresting Facts about the UFO Sightings

One of the biggest conspiracy theories of the universe is the existence of the extra-terrestrial beings present on the earth. Science has a lot of conspiracy theories that are worth knowing about, and that is the reason as to why there are endless probing and research work on all these theories hoping that they will be proved true or otherwise one day. Not all of us believe in the idea of the existence of the extra-terrestrial beings. These extra-terrestrial beings are believed to have been in existence just from the beginning of time. There are theories like they will be better than human beings in terms of science and technology as well. Though this seems weird, evidence proves that they do exist. Yes, so here we are going to see a bit about these UFO sightings.

What are UFO Sightings?

The UFO sightings are nothing but the identification of the anomalies that are present on earth. As long as science and discovery exist, we strongly believe that we have left no turned unturned add far as the earthy things are concerned. That is the reason as to why we believe that anything that is concerned as an anomaly is something they persons to a different world or as the arrival of an alien spacecraft. It was all a result of the analysis that people made to find out if there are other creatures or of the universe and if life can exist there. It is quite laughable, but anything that doesn't belong to earth belongs to the alien world.

The contribution of Philip Mantle:

Many of us who are not into too much of science and anomaly might not be aware of Philip Mantle. He is a globally renowned person and is an author as well. Over the past years, he has spent a lot of time in analysing and discovering various factors that person's to the UFO files. He has also had his own research work, and as a result, he came up with a lot of theories with regard to UFO long with photo evidence. Since he came up with a lot of theoretical and material evidence the government took up top 5 of his studies and decided to work on it and figure out the truth.

Other works:

Apart from the contributions made by Philip, there were also a lot of other people who came up with the concept of aliens and flying objects. People who work with radar system has stated that they identified non-human creatures, spaceships that have no relevance to earth and other such abnormal things. People who are too much into photography especially during the night time have had the privilege of being too see a few of these anomalies. Our satellites are capturing pictures of objects that are out of this universe, and it seems to send some pictures that are worthwhile. Apart from the earth and it's surface, satellites are also focussing on such anomalies. So these are the UFO sightings, and they are yet to be proved or disproved

January 20, 2018

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September 7, 2019

Backpacking is a lifetime experience you don't want to forget. Maybe you've already done it before, and you already know the what's and don'ts of such activity. But for first timers, backpacking can be a bit intimidating for them. What are you going to bring? Where do you need to go in order to fully experience the wonders of backpacking? Below, we provided backpacking tips that you probably need.

Picking the Right Destination

We can travel everywhere in the world, but which place is best to visit first? Is it safe? Does it cost too much? According to National Geographic, places such as Colorado, New Zealand, Zimbabwe, Vietnam, Philippines, Eastern Europe, Columbia, Ecuador, Argentina are some of the places where you can experience backpacking to its fullest. If you're a nature lover, places like Iceland, Argentina, Colorado, Canada are highly recommended. If you're more of a beach person, then Mexico, Philippines, Thailand is the perfect place for you.

The safest place to go especially for women are Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Colorado, Iceland, and Eastern Europe. Places like Zimbabwe, Philippines, Columbia, Ecuador, Argentina, and Turkey are the least safe places that you should double check. Visiting these countries in some areas requires you to be vigilant. This is because of political unrest due to different religious beliefs.

Packing the Right Gear

Backpacking takes a lot of time to travel compared to your usual trip to the beach or something. In order to prepare yourself, you must know how to pack smartly and take advantage of your luggage as possible without stressing yourself. Make sure that you have everything you need but also keeping them lightweight at the same time. So what should we do?

Backpack – a sturdy and solid backpack is your best friend for your journey. Bags such as Packing Bags or a Flight Bag is also a good choice too. Packing bags can be used to put your clothes while a Flight Bag acts as a protective shield for your backpack against damage and dirt. Also, don't forget to put a tag on your backpacks so you'll know it's yours once it gets lost.

Important Papers/Cards – Of course, don't forget the most important papers and cards to bring with you. Papers such as your airplane ticket, travel insurance, documents, copies of your driver's license and passport are needed if you're going abroad. Cards such as your debit card, health card, and credit card must also be brought too.

Travel sheet – Travel sheets are essential to bring since sleeping bags takes too much space to bring. Many people are considering travel sheets since they're more easier to wash. Although you can still rent sleeping bags in different stores. When traveling to cold countries, it's necessary to rent or buy a sleeping bag to protect you from the freezing weather.

Money belt – If carrying bags is not your thing, you can opt for a money belt instead to carry your cash and important documents around. It can also be worn around your neck

and put a scarf around it so nobody can see it.

Clothing – Choosing the right clothing can help you save space and weight on your luggage. Choose a fleece vest over a thick sweater, leggings over jeans. Wearing pretty clothes is unnecessary if you're going on a backpacking adventure. Bringing 5 to 7 pieces of clothes is essential so you can wear different clothing throughout your adventure. You don't have to worry about that number of clothes. If you're not lazy enough, you can wash your used clothes if you have the time. But be careful, if you're traveling to another country, you have to be aware that they use different laundry products so the quality of your clothes may differ after a complete wash.

First aid kit – We may encounter dangerous paths as we go along the way, so it's better to bring a first aid kit with you just in case. Medicines such as paracetamols, ibuprofen, diarrhea inhibitors, and vitamin tablets are also a must. Don't also forget to bring betadine ointments, alcohols, clippers, tweezers to aid your wounds. You might as well bring a sunscreen to help protect yourself from the heat.

Destination Tips

Before taking off, check your bag if you've brought all your essentials. Your VISA is one of the most important thing to bring especially if you're going to travel overseas. Another thing is to ensure that your money is converted to your destination's currency. You can exchange money while you're still at your country, or do it at the airport of your destination.

Booking your flight ticket and accommodations in advance can help you save time and trouble. This is very convenient especially for first time backpackers. When you arrive at your destination, you'll meet other backpackers along the way. Which can give you tips and smart routes and where's the safest places to go. You can also travel together if you don't want to travel alone which is also a perfect way to make friends.

Another important thing to do is to know everything about a country/destination before deciding to go. This prepares you for any political and cultural differences that you might encounter during your adventure. Reading in advance can also help you see what sights and places to visit in a particular destination.

During your trip, it's important to take everything slow and seize the moment. Best memories always happen from unexpected things. When you travel slowly, you can stay longer as you want in the place you're in. Giving you the time and chance to explore everything and enjoying them at the same time.

And lastly, the last backpacking tip you should know is to trust your instincts. If something doesn't feel right, then it's time to look for other safer alternatives. It's important to take care of yourself so you won't end up getting lost and being kidnapped or something. After all, you're there to enjoy and experience new things, not to risk your life or go missing along the way.

Six Essential Winter Camping and Backpacking Tips

August 7, 2019

Winter is the perfect time to go outside and camp or backpack your way along the trail. Everything will look different as every rock, hills, roads, and mountains are entirely covered with snow. It can be a challenge though to go camping or backpacking in the snow, but there are ways to make it more enjoyable without worrying about getting frostbite or hypothermia. Here are some six essential tips for winter campers and

backpackers.

Bring a Map and Know Your Trails

Going on a trip without knowing your trails can make you lost. That's why it's really important to bring a map with you and pay close attention to way finding during your winter journey. Places like the Appalachian trail is blazed white, making it harder to find blazes in the winter. Meanwhile, in the Adirondacks, some trail markers on the ground are entirely covered in snow, which is why cairns are built for helping you stay on track.

Bring a Warm-Water Filled Nalgene Bottle with You

Cold winter nights can unexpectedly become more colder. To help you stay warm, bring a Nalgene Bottle filled with warm water with you during sleeping. You can put anything inside it, maybe a hot cocoa, or hot choco, or anything that's warm. The best part besides of keeping you warm during your sleep, you can have a hot beverage to drink on when you wake up in the morning.

Keep Your Water from Freezing

If you're in a location where the cold weather is stronger than normal, there may be chances where your water bottle can freeze faster than it should be. To prevent this from happening, add electrolyte mixes like Gatorade or Nuun to your Water. This makes your water freeze slowly. Turning your bottle of water upside down can also help ice to form at the bottom and not on the mouth of the bottle.

Bring Something to Sit On

Keeping yourself active is the key to stay warm during your journey, but there's nothing better than to sit down around a nice and cozy campfire at camp. When our bodies get contact in the ground, it loses a ton of heat which makes us cold. Insulate your body from the ground as you can. The Therm-a-rest Z-Lite mattress is the best choice when it comes to this. It's great to be used as a sitting material or even a sleeping pad.

Bring a Pillow

If you want to get that comfortable sleep you've been wanting for during your winter journey, it's advisable to bring a pillow with you. Doing so prevents you to use your extra clothes to use as a pillow just because you didn't bring one.

Bring Extra Fuel

Cooking things can take a little longer outside in the cold. Sooner or later, you won't notice that you've run out of fuel on your stove. It's important to bring lots, and I mean lots and lots of fuel for your trip. This prepares you just in case you're in the middle of nowhere and convenience stores are out of sight where you need to buy more fuel. Also, make sure that your stove is working properly before you leave. You don't want to bring a broken stove and go into caveman mode in your winter camping right?

Meal Planning Tips for Your Backpacking Journey

July 7, 2019

Planning what food to bring for your trip is a daunting task to do. You need to think smartly what's good and what's not to help your body stay on top during long days of chasing the horizon. Should you bring gluten or dairy-free products? Do you have weight and nutritional considerations? Should dehydrated meals do the trick? In this

article, we're going to explore the basics of back country nutrition along with meal planning tips to help you stay alert and fueled during your backpacking adventure.

Watch Out for Your Calories

Knowing how much calories your body needs during your adventure is a must. Smartphone apps such as "MyFitnessPal" or "Fitbit" can help you track your daily calorie intake. Once you know your average daily calorie intake, you have to double that number while you're in the back country. For example, you burn about 2,000 calories at home, consuming about 3,000 calories a day in the backcountry is needed. This is a great way to determine your backpacking food requirements.

Micromanage Your Macro nutrients

Some backpacking explorers tend to stop their backpacking meal planning once their calories are accounted for. However, doing so will leave you fatigued and sluggish since your body lacks essential macronutrients such as healthy fats and proteins. On the other hand, going for about 10-20 miles a day can make your body feel weak and may lead to lethargy.

Macro-nutrients

The moment we consume food, it gets broken down into three categories of macronutrients: carbohydrates, protein, and fat. Carbohydrates such as bread, fruits, vegetables are all broken down into glucose. Protein such as meats, eggs, and dairy products on the other hand, are broken down into amino acids. Meanwhile, fats are processed into triglycerides, which is a very dense form of calories. Combining these three types of macronutrients can give you proper nutrition during your trip.

Carbohydrates

Eating too much carbs can give you that bloated feeling even though you're still hungry. This is because carbohydrates are broken down into fast burning glucose in our body. We can eat a lot of carbohydrates and still feel hungry thereafter. This is the way our body tells us that it needs protein and fats to pair with carbohydrates.

Proteins

When you're on your trip, protein should be on top of your meal planning list. Consuming protein releases glucagon in our bodies which tells us that we're full making us feel satiated. Protein is also rich in amino acids which can help build muscle mass. If you ever feel down and off during your backcountry adventure, then it's time to maximize your protein intake.

Healthy Fats

So many people are staying away from fat because of its bad and unhealthy factors. But in reality, fats are important if you want a balanced and nutritious diet. Of course, we have to choose healthy fats in considering this. Consuming fat helps our brain to build synaptic pathways for our bodies to store fat as fuel that can be burned later while on the trail. Healthy fats such as coconut oil, butter, and ghee can help you stay energized and alert during your journey.

Grain-Free Meals is a Must

It's important to consume grain-free meals when you're traveling along the backcountry. But why do we need to? Well, consuming too much gluten-containing grains can lead to chronic inflammation and joint pain which can turn into a lethargy that's caused by too much consumption of carbohydrates. This is why grain-free meals are important so that you won't wake up in the middle of your journey worrying about sore knees and back pain.

Backpacking Tips for Women On Their Periods

June 7, 2019

It can be annoying when you're having the time of your life backpacking on your country's trail side, and suddenly your period starts to act up again out of nowhere. So what are we going to do when our bodies hit that time of the month? Well, it's not that bad, as long as you're prepared and have the right supplies needed then you're good to go.

Tampons

Tampons are your best friend when it comes to these. They're handy, easy to use, and doesn't need applicators to begin with. Off course, after using it you have to pack them up, not just throw them into the ground where you're hiking. You don't want other backpackers or animals to pick up your vaginal trash right? So how do we pack them? Ziplock Bags – these things are great to use as a trash bag. It's handy and not bulky like those large plastic bags you see everywhere. So whenever you're done using a tampon, pack them inside ziplock bags so you can put them into the trash for later.

Diva Cups

If you're sick of using tampons because you feel uncomfortable with it, a great alternative is Diva Cups. It's like a disposable menstrual cup, only better. It fits into place and securely covers your area ready to catch those red tides. So why are Diva Cups amazing? Here's why:

No leaks – compared to Tampons, Diva Cups don't leak. If you happen to experience any leaks while using such, be sure to properly insert them and take time to learn using it correctly.

Can be easily cleaned – apart from being handy and easy to use, Diva Cups can be easily cleaned without hassle. Which is very convenient to empty when you wake up in the morning, while at camp, and finally before you go to bed. Hiking all day can now be enjoyable without worrying about your period.

No more TSS – Toxic Shock Syndrome is a major concern for women who uses Tampons. It's also present when using Diva Cups. But as long as you clean them regularly, you don't have to worry about TSS too much.

Invisible – Diva Cups works like magic. You can't feel if it's there unlike Tampons.

Making you comfortable during hiking, climbing, playing, etc.

No more trash – Unlike Tampons, Diva Cups can be used as many times as you want as long as you clean them properly. Say goodbye to carrying Ziplock bags for trash.

So there you have it! As you can see, Diva Cups works wonders when it comes to controlling your period. Say goodbye to uncomfortable Tampons and say hello to magical Diva Cups. Don't forget to bring them on your trip and your area down there will thank you later.

Theme of Rigorous Themes
Welcome to the interdisciplinary seminar
Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism

The interdisciplinary seminar on the Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism is designed as the internet version of an ongoing research seminar of graduate students at the department of theology of Marquette University (Milwaukee, USA). The seminar is directed by Andrei Orlov, a professor of Judaism and Christianity in Antiquity (Marquette University). The seminar started in March 2002 as an attempt to investigate Jewish mystical traditions in the eastern Christian theological and liturgical texts. It was thought that the seminar would help initiate and inspire the discussion about the Jewish influences on eastern Christian mysticism among a broader audience.

The internet version of the seminar was constituted on April 17, 2002. It is a regular text seminar consisting of scholars and graduate students of ancient languages, systematic theology, philosophy, patristics, biblical exegesis, and Judaism.

Currently the seminar is not confined solely to the students of Marquette University but also includes participants from various scholarly communities.

Themes are announced and resources pertaining to them are posted on this webpage. The resources normally include previously published and unpublished scholarly articles, electronic publications, lectures, reviews, and sometimes the critical responses to these materials. All copyrighted materials on this page are for classroom use only. Reproduction other than "fair use" quotations is prohibited. The articles, reviews, lectures, and critical responses must be sent to the project moderators in order to be posted on the webpage.

This project seeks to provide a forum for electronically mediated scholarly discussion about Jewish mystical traditions in the eastern Christian texts.

Some documents on this webpage are available for download only as *. pdf files. These files require free Adobe Acrobat Reader in order to be viewed.

The current themes include the following subjects:

THEME 1: Jewish and Christian Mysticism

Theophaneia School: Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism

Ранняя иудейская мистика и славянские ветхозаветные апокрифы

A Farewell to the Merkavah Tradition (Andrei Orlov)

What is Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism? (April D. DeConick) pdf

Liturgy and Mysticism: The Experience of God in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Part I (Alexander Golitzin). pdf

Liturgy and Mysticism: The Experience of God in Eastern Orthodox Christianity. Part II (Alexander Golitzin). pdf

THEME 2: Transformation

The Place of the Presence of God: Aphrahat of Persia's Portrait of the Christian Holy Man (Alexander Golitzin).

Glorification through Fear in 2 Enoch (Andrei Orlov)

Традиции Преображающего Видения в Иудаизме и Христианстве

Воскресение Тела Адама: Искупительная Роль Еноха-Метатрона во Второй книге Еноха (Andrei Orlov)

Парадигмы преображающего видения в Макариевских Беседах (Andrei Orlov and Alexander Golitzin)

“Без Меры и Без Подобия”: Предания о Божественном Теле во Второй книге Еноха (Andrei Orlov)

Paradigms of the Transformational Vision in the Macarian Homilies (Andrei Orlov, Alexander Golitzin).

A Testimony to Christianity as Transfiguration: The Macarian Homilies and Orthodox Spirituality (Alexander Golitzin).

Demons of Change (Andrei Orlov)

THEME 3: The Name of God

Metatron as the Mediator of the Divine Name (Andrei Orlov)

Традиции Имени Божьего в Откровении Авраама (Andrei Orlov)

Mediators of the Divine Name (Andrei Orlov)

Yahoel as the “Second Power” (Andrei Orlov)

Yahoel as Sar Torah (Andrei Orlov)

Aural Ideology in the Hebrew Bible (Andrei Orlov)

Vested with Adam's Glory: Moses as the Luminous Counterpart of Adam in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Macarian Homilies (Andrei Orlov).

THEME 4: Fallen Angels

Затопленные Кущи: Предания о садах в славянской версии Третьей книги Варуха

и Книге Исполинов (Andrei Orlov)

The Watchers of Satanail: The Fallen Angels Traditions in 2 (Slavonic) Enoch (Andrei Orlov)

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The Pteromorphic Angelology of the Apocalypse of Abraham (Andrei Orlov)

The Flooded Arboretums: The Garden Traditions in the Slavonic Version of 3 Baruch and the Book of Giants (Andrei Orlov)

"What is Below?" Mysteries of Leviathan in the Early Jewish Accounts and Mishnah Hagigah 2:1 (Andrei Orlov)

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The Curses of Azazel (Andrei Orlov)

THEME 5: Two Powers in Heaven

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Two Powers in Heaven... Manifested (Andrei Orlov)

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Secrets of Creation in 2 (Slavonic) Enoch (Andrei Orlov).

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 Special People or Special Books? On Qumran and New Testament Notions of Canon (Daniel Schwartz).
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 The DSS and the Apostolic Fathers, with Some Observations on Other Early Christian Literature Apart from the NT (Robert Kraft).
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The Watchers of Satanael: The Fallen Angels Traditions in 2 (Slavonic) Enoch (Andrei Orlov)
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Observations sur l'oeuvre de Gershom Scholem (Charles Mopsik et Eric Smilevitch).
Philosophic Mysticism: The Ultimate Goal of Medieval Judaism (David R. Blumenthal).

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Rambi: Index of Articles on Jewish Studies
Hebrew University Bibliographic Search
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BiBIL: Bibliographie biblique informatisée de Lausanne
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If you have an idea or a theme which can be part of the Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism Project, please contact the project moderator.

Project Moderator: Andrei Orlov

Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism Project, Marquette University| Last updated 2020-03-14 |

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The Ted Hughes Homepage

The Iron Man

The Iron Man, made for Peter Townshend's musical adaptation of the story, found resting in a barn at Moortown Farm in 1997. © Ann Skea

Old Crow

Flying your black bag of jewels

From chaos to chaos

Probe hard for those maggoty deaths

Which poison our lives.

Poetic Quest cover

Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest (e-book)
(University of New England Press, 1994). This book examines Hughes' creative alchemy in *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River*. It discusses many of Hughes' poems in detail and draws on the author's own correspondence with Hughes and on unpublished material from original manuscripts. Illustrations from alchemical manuscripts and from the works of William Blake complement the text.

Poster

Birthday Letters: Alchemy, Cabbala and Psyche.

A poster linking Tarot, Cabbala and Hebrew letters to show Ted Hughes's detailed use of symbols, memory and visual imagination in *Birthday Letters*. Presented at the International Jungian Association Conference, 'Psyche and Imagination', University of Greenwich, July 2006.

A full discussion of Hughes's careful shaping of *Birthday Letters* can be read at *Poetry and Magic 1*.

Rugby Street Sign

The Ted Hughes London Walks

Downloadable maps and notes of London places associated with the life and work of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.

Brief quotations are included as a guide to some of the poems by Ted Hughes which are associated with places numbered on the maps.

The Ted Hughes Society

The Ted Hughes Society

Promoting the scholarly reading and discussion of the work of Ted Hughes

Jump to Interview Transcripts and Memoirs

Timeline: A chronological biography listing Ted Hughes' publications, interests and life events. Updated July 2025.

Notes and Queries: Some notes and answers to queries on copyright, poetry analysis, texts, and various aspects of Ted Hughes' life and work. Discussion of many poems and

poetic sequences. Also, notes on some of the manuscripts relevant to the work of Hughes and Plath which are held in the British Library. (Updated September. 2023.)

'Agdistis: Sun Gods and the Ravaging of the Great Earth Mother'. This paper examines Hughes' potential collaboration with the Australian artist Arthur Boyd, telling the myth of Agdistis and the way ceremonies associated with this myth and the worship of Mithras influenced the writing of *Gaudete*. It was presented at the International Ted Hughes Conference at the University of Huddersfield, Sept. 2022. (NEW April. 2025.)

'Healing and Sweetening': Ted Hughes and the Regeneration of Elmet an exploration of Hughes' use of poetry and of the powers of Nature in *Remains of Elmet* to heal the historic destruction wrought in the Calder Valley by religious fervour, the Industrial Revolution, and war. Published in *Post Green: Literature, Culture and the Environment*, Murali Sivaramakrishnan and Animesh Roy (Eds.) Lexington Books, Dec.2023. (April. 2024).

Ted Hughes, 'An Alchemy' and Shakespeare: Hughes' poem 'An Alchemy' (THCP 279) is constructed as an alchemical process which seeks to describe the Alchemical nature of Shakespeare's works. This paper offers a description and analysis of the poem. A section of this paper was presented at the British Library Symposium on 'Ted Hughes and Expressionism' (Sept 2023) and Part 1 (not included) is published in *Intellect Book 2.0 'online first'*. (September. 2023).

Birthday Letters and The Sorrows of the Deer: In the Birthday Letters manuscripts in the British Library, the original title for these poems was 'The Sorrows of the Deer'. This paper discusses the importance of the deer for Hughes and the reasons for this choice. Published in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal* Vol.9 Issue 1.(Nov.2022) .

Simon Armitage's 'Lockdown' and Ted Hughes's 'Churn Milk Joan'. Social distancing in the 1600s. A brief discussion of two poems which have a surprising connection with the present. (Jan. 2021).

Ted Hughes, Ecology and the Arts: (Published in *Global Perspectives on Eco-Aesthetics and Eco-Ethics*, Maiti, K. and Chakraborty, S.(Eds.), Lexington Books, 2020). "We have no problem in becoming aware that we are destroying our planet and our life on it. Our problem is the very great difficulty of becoming aware in such a way that we do something about it" (Hughes). (June 2020).

Ted Hughes and 'Astrological Conundrums': (Published in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal*. Vol.7, Issue 2, 2019). An annotation made by Hughes at the end of his poem, 'Astrological Conundrums', reveals how his astrological birth-chart and the mythological figures associated with it influenced his life and his work. (January 2019).

Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition: (Published in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal*. Vol.6, Issue 1, 2017). Hughes' negotiations with the Goddess and his belief in the magical healing power of poetry are part of a long tradition dating back to the work of

the Roman poet/philosopher Lucretius (c.99–55 BCE). Lucretius' poem, *On the Nature of Things*, influenced the work of Chaucer, Spencer, Sidney, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth and Yeats, as well that of many eminent philosophers and scientists. (October 2017).

Ted Hughes and David Hockney's *Alphabet*: (Published in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal*. Vol.5, Issue 1, 2016). In 1991, to raise money for the AIDS Crisis Trust, David Hockney created 26 pictures of individual letters of the alphabet. Stephen Spender, on behalf of that charity then sent one letter to each of twenty-six well-known British and American writers inviting them to contribute original text in response to their particular letter. Ted Hughes was given the letter 'S'. (November 2017).

Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest : An exploration of Ted Hughes use of myth, mysticism and alchemy in *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River*, with detailed examination of many of the poems.

"O Lady": Hughes and his Muse: An investigation of the development of Hughes' negotiations with his Muse/Goddess from the time of his earliest, romantic, view of the Muse, to his complex and sincere negotiations with the Goddess of Complete Being. (October 2016).

'The Calm' by Ted Hughes: Notes and Précis of a 'lost' play: As far as is known, this play exists only in scattered fragments of manuscript and typescript. As many of these as possible have been collected, transcribed and collated to form a coherent whole from which this précis has been made. (December 2015. Addendum, Nov. 2016. Update July 2019).

Ted Hughes and Shakespeare: "A Particular Knot of Obsessions". An examination of shared beliefs and themes as expressed in Shakespeare and *The Goddess of Complete Being*. First published in *Litro*: 133, April 17, 2014. (February 2015)

Gaudete: and *The Reverend Lumb's Parish and Parishioners*. . Springtime abundance, Major Hagen, sex, violence and a suggested map of Lumb's Parish. (February 2015)

Ted Hughes' *Vacanas*: *The Difficulties of a Bridegroom* :a discussion of poems inspired by the *Vacanas* of Siva-worshipping mystics of Southern India. First published by Palgrave Macmillan in *Ted Hughes; Cambridge to Collected*, (Eds.) Wormald, Roberts and Gifford, 2013.

A previously unpublished chart of the poems, links, and dates and places of publication is included. (April 2014. Updated Feb.2020).

'Creatures of Light' : Why and how did Ted Hughes use Magic in his poetry? An historical perspective.

Poetry and Magic 1: Birthday Letters : An analysis of *Birthday Letters* and of Ted Hughes' use of Tarot and Cabbala in this sequence.

Poetry and Magic 2: Howls & Whispers : The Averse Sephiroth and the Spheres of the Qliphoth. More Cabbalistic magic.

Poetry and Magic 3: Capriccio : Capriccio and The Path of the Sword. Confronting and controlling the demons. (This sequence of essays on Birthday Letters , Howls & Whispers and Capriccio was completed 17 October 2007).

The Birthday Letters Archive in the British Library. Notes on the many manuscripts, typescripts, drafts and lists of poems in Ted Hughes' Birthday Letters archive, with reference to The Sorrows of the Deer, and to his use of Cabbala. (April 2015)

Addendum to 'The Birthday Letters Archive in the British Library'. Notes on 'The Sorrows of the Deer': the earliest title for Birthday Letters. (31 August 2017).

Adam and the Sacred Nine : A Cabbalistic Drama . This paper traces the way in which Ted Hughes, following the example of such poets as Spencer, Sidney, Dante, Milton and Shakespeare, used Cabbala as a framework for his sequence of poems. (2010).

Ted Hughes: Occult Energies . A personal memoir: How I first became aware of Ted's knowledge and use of Mysticism, Alchemy and Cabbala, and his attitude to discussion of these occult arts. Published in Translation Cafe. No.94. Feb. 10. 2010. University of Bucharest, Romania.

'Ted Hughes and The Goddess' The inspiration, origins and use of The Goddess in Ted Hughes' works. First published by The Ted Hughes Society Journal, January 2013.

Ted Hughes' River This detailed discussion of the River poems was first published as part 3 of Ted Hughes the Poetic Quest. It is now updated with an addendum, based on archived correspondence, outlining the origins of the book and its publication history. (1994. Updated: November 2017))

Ted Hughes and Crow : A detailed discussion of Crow and of the role of Crow himself as a Trickster figure. Published in The Endicott Studio Journal of Mythic Arts, Winter 2007.

Ted Hughes and 'The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown: What the Starry Heavens Sang to His Royal Highness Prince William On 21st July 1982' . Ted Hughes' astrological poem written for the birth of HRH Prince William.

'Ted Hughes and the British Bardic Tradition' : Some reflections on a Poet Laureate's training, its Celtic origins and the traditional role of the bard. Published as 'Taliesin for the 20th Century' in Urthona, Issue 25, Summer, 2008.

'Wolf-Masks: From Hawk to Wolfwatching' : Ted Hughes' use of the wolf as a symbol and a mask in his poetry.

'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet' : A discussion of Ted Hughes' re-creation of his Yorkshire homeland, with close reference to many of the Elmet poems.

Variant Editions A close examination of the variant editions of Cave Birds, River, Remains of Elmet, Elmet and Three Books This paper was first published in Ted Hughes Society Journal, Issue 2, Volume 1 (2012)

A Creative Collaboration: R. J. Lloyd and Ted Hughes An account of the collaboration between Ted Hughes and the artist R. J. Lloyd in What is the Truth, and in their own Sunstone Press publications: The Cat and the Cuckoo, The Mermaid's Purse and Earth Dances. (August 2012)

Ted Hughes and Small Press Publication. An account of Hughes's involvement with various small press publications, in particular, Modern Poetry in Translation , The Rainbow Press and Nicholas Hughes's Morrighu Press. Including detailed lists of Rainbow Press and Morrighu Press publications. (Updated November 2016).

'Understanding Ted Hughes' . A brief 'Introduction' to the poetry of Ted Hughes, with reference to poems by both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.

The abandoned script of King Lear; Pike and Angels; and Orghast: Notes on a BBC Radio 3 interview with Ted Hughes. Notes on Ted Hughes' discussion of the dream which made him abandon his King Lear script; about mythology and poetry; and about what he learned from the language experiment of Orghast. New: 25 Sept. 2014

Difficulties of a Bridegroom .(Faber, 1995). A review of Ted Hughes' book of this title.

'Ted Hughes, Gaudete, Cave Birds, and the 1975 Ilkley Literature Festival.' Keith Sagar was preparing to give this talk about Ted Hughes and his work at the Ilkley Literature Festival on October 20th, 2013. Keith died on October 15th. New: October 2013.

'Ted Hughes and Shamanism' by Michael Baldwin (Memoir) Michael Baldwin is a widely published poet, novelist, essayist and short-story writer. He was a long-time friend of Ted Hughes and in this memoir he recalls their shared (usually sceptical) fascination with magic. He also writes of A. Alvarez's disparagement of Ted as a shaman. (Sept. 2012)

Ted Hughes and the Theatre by Tim Supple (Memoir) . Tim Supple is an internationally recognized director of plays and opera. He has worked with many of the major theatre companies in England and around the world and is currently Co-Director, with Josephine Burton, of Dash Arts. He directed Ted Hughes's versions of Lorca's Blood Wedding, Wedekind's Spring Awakening, and Tales from Ovid.

Ted Hughes' Memorial Service . A personal record of the service held in Westminster Abbey on 13 May, 1999.

Orghast at Persepolis: Interview with Ted Hughes Transcript of a rare interview with Ted Hughes about Orghast (the language and the play) conducted by Peter Wilson at the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts in 1971. (July 2015).

An Interview with Ted Hughes: Transcript of an interview with Ted Hughes conducted whilst he was a Special Guest at the Asia Poetry Festival, 17-19 November 1989. (Feb. 2012)

Conversation with Hughes' Contemporaries: Transcript of a recording made at the International Ted Hughes Conference, Pembroke College, Cambridge University on Friday 17th September, 2010.

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'Sylvia Plath, Ariel and the Tarot' These chapters explore the possibility that Sylvia Plath may have used the Tarot to write and to arrange her Ariel manuscripts. March 2013.

Links and reviews .

Contact: Scholars, researchers and others interested in the work of Ted Hughes can contact me at ann@skea.com. Include 'Hughes' in the subject header.

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The Iron Man

The Iron Man, made for Peter Townshend's musical adaptation of the story, found

resting in a barn at Moortown Farm in 1997. © Ann Skea

Old Crow
Flying your black bag of jewels
From chaos to chaos
Probe hard for those maggoty deaths
Which poison our lives.

Poetic Quest cover

Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest (e-book)
(University of New England Press, 1994). This book examines Hughes' creative alchemy in *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River*. It discusses many of Hughes' poems in detail and draws on the author's own correspondence with Hughes and on unpublished material from original manuscripts. Illustrations from alchemical manuscripts and from the works of William Blake complement the text.

Poster

Birthday Letters: Alchemy, Cabbala and Psyche.
A poster linking Tarot, Cabbala and Hebrew letters to show Ted Hughes's detailed use of symbols, memory and visual imagination in *Birthday Letters*. Presented at the International Jungian Association Conference, 'Psyche and Imagination', University of Greenwich, July 2006.

A full discussion of Hughes's careful shaping of *Birthday Letters* can be read at *Poetry and Magic* 1.

Rugby Street Sign

The Ted Hughes London Walks
Downloadable maps and notes of London places associated with the life and work of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.
Brief quotations are included as a guide to some of the poems by Ted Hughes which are associated with places numbered on the maps.

The Ted Hughes Society
The Ted Hughes Society
Promoting the scholarly reading and discussion of the work of Ted Hughes

Jump to Interview Transcripts and Memoirs

Timeline: A chronological biography listing Ted Hughes' publications, interests and life events. Updated July 2025.

Notes and Queries: Some notes and answers to queries on copyright, poetry analysis, texts, and various aspects of Ted Hughes' life and work. Discussion of many poems and poetic sequences. Also, notes on some of the manuscripts relevant to the work of Hughes and Plath which are held in the British Library. (Updated September. 2023.)

'Agdistis: Sun Gods and the Ravaging of the Great Earth Mother'. This paper examines Hughes' potential collaboration with the Australian artist Arthur Boyd, telling the myth of Agdistis and the way ceremonies associated with this myth and the worship of Mithras influenced the writing of *Gaudete*. It was presented at the International Ted Hughes Conference at the University of Huddersfield, Sept. 2022. (NEW April. 2025.)

'Healing and Sweetening': Ted Hughes and the Regeneration of Elmet an exploration of Hughes' use of poetry and of the powers of Nature in *Remains of Elmet* to heal the historic destruction wrought in the Calder Valley by religious fervour, the Industrial Revolution, and war. Published in *Post Green: Literature, Culture and the Environment*, Murali Sivaramakrishnan and Animesh Roy (Eds.) Lexington Books, Dec.2023. (April. 2024).

Ted Hughes, 'An Alchemy' and Shakespeare: Hughes' poem 'An Alchemy' (THCP 279) is constructed as an alchemical process which seeks to describe the Alchemical nature of Shakespeare's works. This paper offers a description and analysis of the poem. A section of this paper was presented at the British Library Symposium on 'Ted Hughes and Expressionism'(Sept 2023) and Part 1 (not included) is published in *Intellect Book 2.0 'online first'*. (September. 2023).

Birthday Letters and The Sorrows of the Deer: In the Birthday Letters manuscripts in the British Library, the original title for these poems was 'The Sorrows of the Deer'. This paper discusses the importance of the deer for Hughes and the reasons for this choice. Published in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal* Vol.9 Issue 1.(Nov.2022) .

Simon Armitage's 'Lockdown' and Ted Hughes's 'Churn Milk Joan'. Social distancing in the 1600s. A brief discussion of two poems which have a surprising connection with the present. (Jan. 2021).

Ted Hughes, Ecology and the Arts: (Published in *Global Perspectives on Eco-Aesthetics and Eco-Ethics*, Maiti, K. and Chakraborty, S.(Eds.), Lexington Books, 2020). "We have no problem in becoming aware that we are destroying our planet and our life on it. Our problem is the very great difficulty of becoming aware in such a way that we do something about it" (Hughes). (June 2020).

Ted Hughes and 'Astrological Conundrums': (Published in the Ted Hughes Society Journal. Vol.7, Issue 2, 2019). An annotation made by Hughes at the end of his poem, 'Astrological Conundrums', reveals how his astrological birth-chart and the mythological figures associated with it influenced his life and his work. (January 2019).

Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition: (Published in the Ted Hughes Society Journal. Vol.6, Issue 1, 2017). Hughes' negotiations with the Goddess and his belief in the magical healing power of poetry are part of a long tradition dating back to the work of the Roman poet/philosopher Lucretius (c.99–55 BCE). Lucretius' poem, *On the Nature of Things*, influenced the work of Chaucer, Spenser, Sidney, Shakespeare, Milton, Blake, Wordsworth and Yeats, as well that of many eminent philosophers and scientists. (October 2017).

Ted Hughes and David Hockney's Alphabet: (Published in the Ted Hughes Society Journal. Vol.5, Issue 1, 2016). In 1991, to raise money for the AIDS Crisis Trust, David Hockney created 26 pictures of individual letters of the alphabet. Stephen Spender, on behalf of that charity then sent one letter to each of twenty-six well-known British and American writers inviting them to contribute original text in response to their particular letter. Ted Hughes was given the letter 'S'. (November 2017).

Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest : An exploration of Ted Hughes use of myth, mysticism and alchemy in *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River*, with detailed examination of many of the poems.

"O Lady": Hughes and his Muse: An investigation of the development of Hughes' negotiations with his Muse/Goddess from the time of his earliest, romantic, view of the Muse, to his complex and sincere negotiations with the Goddess of Complete Being. (October 2016).

'The Calm' by Ted Hughes: Notes and Précis of a 'lost' play: As far as is known, this play exists only in scattered fragments of manuscript and typescript. As many of these as possible have been collected, transcribed and collated to form a coherent whole from which this précis has been made. (December 2015. Addendum, Nov. 2016. Update July 2019).

Ted Hughes and Shakespeare: "A Particular Knot of Obsessions". An examination of shared beliefs and themes as expressed in Shakespeare and *The Goddess of Complete Being*. First published in *Litro*: 133, April 17, 2014. (February 2015)

Gaudete: and *The Reverend Lumb's Parish and Parishioners*. . Springtime abundance, Major Hagen, sex, violence and a suggested map of Lumb's Parish. (February 2015)

Ted Hughes' *Vacanas*: *The Difficulties of a Bridegroom* :a discussion of poems inspired by the *Vacanas* of Siva-worshipping mystics of Southern India. First published by Palgrave Macmillan in *Ted Hughes; Cambridge to Collected*, (Eds.) Wormald, Roberts and Gifford, 2013.

A previously unpublished chart of the poems, links, and dates and places of publication is included. (April 2014. Updated Feb.2020).

'Creatures of Light' : Why and how did Ted Hughes use Magic in his poetry? An historical perspective.

Poetry and Magic 1: Birthday Letters : An analysis of Birthday Letters and of Ted Hughes' use of Tarot and Cabbala in this sequence.

Poetry and Magic 2: Howls & Whispers : The Averse Sephiroth and the Spheres of the Qlippoth. More Cabbalistic magic.

Poetry and Magic 3: Capriccio : Capriccio and The Path of the Sword. Confronting and controlling the demons. (This sequence of essays on Birthday Letters , Howls & Whispers and Capriccio was completed 17 October 2007).

The Birthday Letters Archive in the British Library. Notes on the many manuscripts, typescripts, drafts and lists of poems in Ted Hughes' Birthday Letters archive, with reference to The Sorrows of the Deer, and to his use of Cabbala. (April 2015)

Addendum to 'The Birthday Letters Archive in the British Library'. Notes on 'The Sorrows of the Deer': the earliest title for Birthday Letters. (31 August 2017).

Adam and the Sacred Nine : A Cabbalistic Drama . This paper traces the way in which Ted Hughes, following the example of such poets as Spencer, Sidney, Dante, Milton and Shakespeare, used Cabbala as a framework for his sequence of poems. (2010).

Ted Hughes: Occult Energies . A personal memoir: How I first became aware of Ted's knowledge and use of Mysticism, Alchemy and Cabbala, and his attitude to discussion of these occult arts. Published in Translation Cafe. No.94. Feb. 10. 2010. University of Bucharest, Romania.

'Ted Hughes and The Goddess' The inspiration, origins and use of The Goddess in Ted Hughes' works. First published by The Ted Hughes Society Journal, January 2013.

Ted Hughes' River This detailed discussion of the River poems was first published as part 3 of Ted Hughes the Poetic Quest. It is now updated with an addendum, based on archived correspondence, outlining the origins of the book and its publication history. (1994. Updated: November 2017))

Ted Hughes and Crow : A detailed discussion of Crow and of the role of Crow himself as a Trickster figure. Published in The Endicott Studio Journal of Mythic Arts, Winter 2007.

Ted Hughes and 'The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown: What the Starry Heavens Sang to His Royal Highness Prince William On 21st July 1982' . Ted Hughes' astrological

poem written for the birth of HRH Prince William.

'Ted Hughes and the British Bardic Tradition' : Some reflections on a Poet Laureate's training, its Celtic origins and the traditional role of the bard. Published as 'Taliesin for the 20th Century' in *Urthona*, Issue 25, Summer, 2008.

'Wolf-Masks: From Hawk to Wolfwatching' : Ted Hughes' use of the wolf as a symbol and a mask in his poetry.

'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet' : A discussion of Ted Hughes' re-creation of his Yorkshire homeland, with close reference to many of the Elmet poems.

Variant Editions A close examination of the variant editions of *Cave Birds*, *River*, *Remains of Elmet*, *Elmet* and *Three Books* This paper was first published in *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, Issue 2, Volume 1 (2012)

A Creative Collaboration: R. J. Lloyd and Ted Hughes An account of the collaboration between Ted Hughes and the artist R. J. Lloyd in *What is the Truth*, and in their own Sunstone Press publications: *The Cat and the Cuckoo*, *The Mermaid's Purse* and *Earth Dances*. (August 2012)

Ted Hughes and Small Press Publication. An account of Hughes's involvement with various small press publications, in particular, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *The Rainbow Press* and *Nicholas Hughes's Morrighu Press*. Including detailed lists of *Rainbow Press* and *Morrighu Press* publications. (Updated November 2016).

'Understanding Ted Hughes' . A brief 'Introduction' to the poetry of Ted Hughes, with reference to poems by both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.

The abandoned script of *King Lear*; *Pike and Angels*; and *Orghast*: Notes on a BBC Radio 3 interview with Ted Hughes. Notes on Ted Hughes' discussion of the dream which made him abandon his *King Lear* script; about mythology and poetry; and about what he learned from the language experiment of *Orghast*. New: 25 Sept. 2014

Difficulties of a Bridegroom .(Faber, 1995). A review of Ted Hughes' book of this title.

'Ted Hughes, *Gaudete*, *Cave Birds*, and the 1975 Ilkley Literature Festival.' Keith Sagar was preparing to give this talk about Ted Hughes and his work at the Ilkley Literature Festival on October 20th, 2013. Keith died on October 15th. New: October 2013.

'Ted Hughes and Shamanism' by Michael Baldwin (Memoir) Michael Baldwin is a widely published poet, novelist, essayist and short-story writer. He was a long-time friend of Ted Hughes and in this memoir he recalls their shared (usually sceptical) fascination with magic. He also writes of A. Alvarez's disparagement of Ted as a shaman. (Sept. 2012)

Ted Hughes and the Theatre by Tim Supple (Memoir) . Tim Supple is an internationally recognized director of plays and opera. He has worked with many of the major theatre companies in England and around the world and is currently Co-Director, with Josephine Burton, of Dash Arts. He directed Ted Hughes's versions of Lorca's Blood Wedding, Wedekind's Spring Awakening, and Tales from Ovid.

Ted Hughes' Memorial Service . A personal record of the service held in Westminster Abbey on 13 May, 1999.

Orghast at Persepolis: Interview with Ted Hughes Transcript of a rare interview with Ted Hughes about Orghast (the language and the play) conducted by Peter Wilson at the Shiraz-Persepolis Festival of Arts in 1971. (July 2015).

An Interview with Ted Hughes: Transcript of an interview with Ted Hughes conducted whilst he was a Special Guest at the Asia Poetry Festival, 17-19 November 1989. (Feb. 2012)

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Ted Hughes: Timeline

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This list of Ted Hughes' publications, life-events and interests is not comprehensive. It was compiled from my own collection of books, newspaper articles, recordings, letters and notes to give an overview of important and formative influences which have helped to shape his work. It also suggests the date at which some of his works originated.

It is best used in conjunction with a bibliography such as that produced by Keith Sagar and Steven Tabor (Sagar, K and Tabor, S. Ted Hughes: A Bibliography, 1946 -1995 , 2nd Edition, Mansell, London, 1998).

A list of the abbreviations used will be found at the end of the document

Date

Published Books

Published Poems, BroadSides(BS), Edited works(Ed).

Reviews, Essays, Current Interests, Events

1930

Born August 17th , Mytholmroyd, Yorkshire, to William Henry and Edith (née. Farrar) Hughes. Sister (Olwyn) two years older; brother (Gerald) '... was ten years older than me and made my early life a kind of paradise... which was ended abruptly by the war' (Letter to AS Nov.1982 re. 'Two').

'Memoir' (DT , 21 Nov.1998) says that Hughes was '... brought up on his grandmother's farm'. Olwyn Hughes writes that this is incorrect but that they often visited nearby farms. 'My first six years shaped everything' (Interview. DT , 2 Nov.1998)

1938-9

Mytholmroyd house sold Sept. 1938. Family move to Mexborough, Yorkshire. Own a newspaper and tobacco shop.

1943

Mexborough Grammar School

1945

First poems written. 'Zulus and the Wild West... All in imitation of Kipling'.(UU 20)

1946

First poems published in School magazine - Don and Dearne

'Harvesting' (essay) (Don and Dearne) rewritten as 'The Harvesting' (story) (BBC - Dec 1960)

Name used: Eeple Jote Hyewze

Influences: Folktales, Yeats, Hopkins, Virgil, Eliot, the 'very different rhythms of the King James Bible' (WP 5-6)

1948

Wins open exhibition to Cambridge University.

1949

National Service: Basic training at RAF West Kirby, the Wirral. Fighter plotting at RAF Patrington, East Riding, Yorks. Spends much time reading and re-reading all of Shakespeare ('... he literally knows Shakespeare by heart...')(SPLH Aug. 2 1956)

'Song', 'came to me as such things should in your nineteenth year - literally a voice in the air at about 3.00 A.M...' (PR 11).

1951

October: Holding an Entrance Exhibition in English, enters Pembroke College, Cambridge, to study English. 'I spent most of my time reading folklore and Yeats's poems' (UU 56) 'Beethoven's music... was my therapy' (PR 85)

1952

Family return to West Yorkshire to live at The Beacon, Heptonstall.

1953

Fox dream: drops English to study Archaeology and Anthropology (WP 8-9)

1954

'The Little Boys and the Seasons' (Granta)

'Song of the Sorry Lovers' (Chequer)

'The Jaguar' / 'The Casualty' (Chequer)

Pseudonym - Daniel Hearing

Pseudonym - Peter Crew

June: Leaves Pembroke College. Graduates with Honours in Part 1 of English Tripos (2/1), and in section A, Part 1 of the Archaeological and Anthropological Tripos.

1955

1956

'The Woman with Such High Heels' (Delta 5)

Read a Penguin of American Poets '... that started me writing... ', '... infatuated with John Crowe Ransom' (UU 210)

Comment on Chequer (review): Pseudonym - Jonathan Dyce

Living in London (Rugby St.) and Cambridge.

Rose gardener, night-watchman, zoo attendant, reader for J. Arthur Rank, schoolteacher. Planning to teach in Spain then emigrate to Australia (SPLH May 4).

1956

Writes 'The Thought Fox'

'Secretary' / 'Soliloquy of a Misanthrope' / 'Fallgrief's Girl-Friends' / 'Meeting' / 'Law in the Country of Cats' (St. Botolph's Review)

Many Hawk in the Rain poems published

Feb. 25 - Launch of St Botolph's Review. Meets Sylvia Plath

March 23 - Second meeting with Sylvia.

June 16 - Married to Sylvia Plath at St. George the Martyr's Church, Bloomsbury.

June/July/August in Paris and Spain. Writing animal fables (SPJ . 'Benidorm')

Aug - To Heptonstall

Sept - Audition for BBC - poetry readings (SPLH Sept. 28).

Oct 10 - To London for BBC reading of Yeats's poems. Misses Sylvia at station (SPLH Oct. 16; Birthday Letters 'Fate Playing')

Nov - Living in Cambridge (55 Eltisley Ave.) Teaching English and Drama at the Coleridge Secondary Modern School, Cambridge.

Astrology, horoscopes, hypnotism, tarot and experimenting with Ouija board (SPLH Oct. 28)

1957

Sept - Hawk in the Rain

April - 'O'Kelly's Angel' (story) (Granta)

May - 'Bartholemew Pygge Esquire' (story) (Granta)

Many Hawk in the Rain poems published

Aug. 27 - First Lupercal poem published: 'Dream of Horses' (Gracecourt review)

Dec - 'Everyman's Odyssey' (Landmarks and Voyages)

Feb - Hawk in the Rain wins Harper publication contest .

Feb - Pan and Ouija board (SPLH Feb 8). Snatchcraftington, alphabetical fables (SPLH Feb. 24)

April 14 - BBC - reading (1 poem)

May - Hears Robert Frost reading at Cambridge (SPLH May 24)

June - To Yorkshire. Then to USA on RMS Queen Elizabeth (Southampton to New York). (Wellesley then Cape Cod)

Aug - To Northampton (337 Elm St.) Sylvia teaching at Smith College

Aug - Meets Bill and Dido Merwin.

Nov. 20 - Poetry reading at NYC Poetry Centre. (SPL II 192).

Nov. 28 - Recording poetry reading for Woodward Poetry Room, Harvard University. (SPL II 190).

Dec. 15 - BBC - reading 'Hawk in the Rain'

1958

Many Luperca poems published. '... invocations to writing...' (UU 209), 'a deliberate effort to find a simple concrete language' (UU 209)

Spring - Teaching at Amherst, University of Massachusetts.

4 March - Reading at Amherst Student Union, University of Massachusetts (SPLH 2 March)

April 11 - Poetry reading at Harvard (SPLH April 22)

May - Reading Creon in Paul Roche's Oedipus trans. At Smith. (SPJ May 19)

May 4 - Meets Baskins (Leonard and Esther).

June 13 - Six Luperca poems recorded in a joint poetry reading with Sylvia Plath for the Woodberry Poetry Room, Lamont Library, Harvard University. USA.

July - Summons Pan with Ouija board (SPJ July 4; SPLH July 5)

'Billy Hook and the Three Souvenirs' (children's story) published in Jack and Jill.

Aug. 27 - BBC - Luperca poems)

August - Rents flat in Boston (9 Willow Street, Beacon Hill)

Dec - Making wolf mask (SPJ Dec. 28)

Guinness Poetry Award

1959

Pike (BS)(LE 50)

Many Luperca poems published.

Doing "exercises in meditation and invocation... [from] magic literature" (UU 210)

Oct - Writes House of Taurus (scrapped) '... symbolic drama based on the Euripides play The Bacchae' (SPLH Oct. 7). Precursor to Gaudete (ATH 186-7)

Nov - Revising Meet My Folks (SPJ Nov. 1)

April 16 Gives two lectures to English classes at Smith College.

April 28 Working on Meet My Folks! and a collection of Oriental fox stories. (SPL II 316)

April - Awarded Guggenheim fellowship (SPJ April 23).

Reading Sanskrit poetry in translation and books on Buddhism. Collecting fox stories. (SPL II 308).

Reading at Folk Lore library. (SPL II 440).

Summer - touring N. America by car.

Exercises in meditation and invocation. Had been pursuing Cabalistic and Hermetic interests. for some time (UU 41)

Sept - Yaddo Artists' Colony for 11 weeks. Meets Chou Wen-Chung, agrees to collaborate on Bardo Thodol by writing the libretto .

Dec - Returns to England on SS United States (New York to Southampton). (Heptonstall, Yorkshire)

Reviews: Weekend in Dinlock, Segal.

1960

March - Lupercal

Writing Recklings and Wodwo poems and Radio plays

Wodwo 'a descent into destruction of some sort' (UU 205)

'The Caning', 'Very fine, very difficult'(SPJ Nov. 15), 'The Rainhorse', 'Sunday', 'Snow', 'The Harvesting' (stories)

Writing and rewriting Bardo Thodol libretto (unperformed). Setting: Chou Wen-Chung .

Dreams of The Wound action and text. (ABC interview 1976)

Feb - Move to London (3 Chalcot Sq. Primrose Hill)

Feb - Reading at Oxford Poetry Society (BF 184)

March - Using Merwins' study

March - Hawk in the Rain wins Somerset Maugham award (SPLH March 24)

March - Lupercal wins Hawthornden Prize (SPLH March 27)

April 1 - > born

May 4 - Dinner at T.S. Eliot's. Meets Stephen Spender and his wife Natasha Litvin.(SPL II 469)

May 8 - BBC - reading a selection of poems

May - Meets Alan Sillitoe and his wife, Ruth Fainlight (BF 213)

June - Cocktail party at Fabers, photograph with Faber Poets (SPLH June 24),
'Duk-dam charm to call fools in a circle' (ABC interview 1976)

June - Poetry reading at the ICA, London.

July 9 - BBC accepts House of Aries (SPLH July 9)

July 29 - BBC - The Rain Horse (story)

Nov. 10 - BBC - The Odyssey Book V, Hughes' translation of Homer, read by Patrick Garland

Nov. 16 - BBC - The House of Aries (play broadcast)

Dec. 2-4 - Staged reading of House of Aries at The Poets Theatre, Cambridge, Mass.
(SPJ II 523)

Dec. 17 - BBC - The Harvesting (story)

1961

April - Meet my Folks!

Aug - pamphlets for BBC - broadcasts Listening and Writing

Aug - Dully Gumpton's College Courses. 'Theology' "a more concentrated and natural kind of poetry..."(UU 211)

Aug - 'The Wound' written, 'a Celtic-Gothic Bardo Thodol ' (ABC interview 1976)

'Miss Mambrett and the Wet Cellar' (story)

Jan - Thom Gunn to dinner (SPLH Jan 1)

Jan. 31 - BBC - Two of a Kind, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath, interview

Feb - Sylvia Plath miscarries

17 July - Reading (Poetry at the Mermaid Theatre, London)

Aug - Sells lease on London flat to Wevills. Move to Devon (Court Green)

Sept. 6 - BBC - Meet My Folks!

Sept/Oct - BBC - Talks for Woman's Hour, 'Listening and Writing' on 'Fire', 'Air' 'Earth' 'Water'

November - Reading of 'The Calm' at The Poets' Theatre, Cambridge, Mass.

Selector for Poetry Book Society Choice.

Reviews: Lochness Monster , Dinsdale; Living Free, Adamson; The Cat in the Hat Comes Back , Seuss; Barnaby and the Horses , Pender; Timba , Gringolo , Koenig.

1962

May - Selected Poems with Thom Gunn

April - Leonard Baskin (Introduction)

Gaudete - begun as a film script (UU 123)

The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz, Andreas. '... for over a year [this] became my prime source of inspiration' (BBC TP, 1963)

Jan 17 - Nicholas Farrar born

Feb - BBC - The Wound (play produced)

Feb - Interest in shamanic dismemberment, Bacchae and Orphic myths (BF 320). Reading Nietzsche.

March 30 - BBC Home (Schools)- Reading Meet My Folks!

Meets Anthony Thwaite and Eric White to discuss Poetry Book Summer Selection Choice selection.

May 31 - BBC - The Poetry of Keith Douglas (talk and reading)

May - David and Assia Wevill visit Court Green. Ted and Sylvia sell daffodils. (SPLH May 14)

June 29 - BBC - Creatures of the Air. Unpublished

June - Beekeeping (SPLH June 15)

June - 'The Poetry of Keith Douglas' (essay)

July - Reading for Critical Quarterly, Bangor, Wales (BF 251)

Sept - Ted and Sylvia agree to a separation. Ted moves to London.

BBC - (school broadcasts, talk, poems, stories)

Introductions: The Little Prince , St. Exupéry; Tarka the Otter , Williamson; The Worst Journey in the World , Cherry-Garrard.

Reviews: The Nerve of some Animals, Froman. Man and Dolphin , Lilly; Primitive Song, Bowra; One Fish Two Fish , Seuss; The Cat's Opera , Dillon; The Otter's Tale , Maxwell; Animals of the Forest , Vérité; Close-up of a Honeybee , Foster; Oddities of Animal Life , Roberts; Imitations, Lowell; Anthology of W. African Folk-lore , Jablow; Everyman's Ark , Johnson; Here Come the Elephants , Goudey;

1963

Nov - How the Whale Became (fables)

Nov - The Earth-Owl and other Moon People

Jan - Here Today , (Introduction)

May - Five American Poets (Ed)

Sept - 'The Rock', (The Listener)

Jan. 8 - BBC - Snow (story)

Jan. 24 - BBC - Interviewed by Anthony Thwaite about his plays for radio

Jan. 21 - BBC -Difficulties of a Bridegroom (play based on The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz, 'words, music and pictures... the interest is in imagery and mood' (BBC TP, 17 October 1965); 'a tribal dream' (UU 212)

Feb - Sylvia Plath dies

Sept. 11 - BBC - The Rock (talk about his early life)

Sept - 'The Poetry of Keith Douglas' (essay)

Oct. 28 - BBC - Earth-Owl and Other Moon Creatures (reading)

Oct - 'Ten Poems by Sylvia Plath' (introduction)

Nov - 'The Rat Under the Bowler' (essay)

BBC - (interviews, poems, talks)

Reviews: I Said the Sparrow , West; The World of Men , Baldwin; Rule and Energy , Press; Vagrancy , O'Connor; Emily Dickinson's Poetry , Anderson; Folktales of Japan , Seki; Folktales of Israel , Noy.

1964

April - Nessie the Mannerless Monster

Jan - 'The Howling of Wolves'

Feb - Selected Poems, Keith Douglas (Ed): (Introduction)

March - 'The Suitor' (story)

Writing Eat Crow (UU 212)

'Dice' (poem in 8 parts)

14 August - Postcard to Leonard Baskin: 'The Book of Crow is in the egg'. (discovered 2013 by Peter Fydler in the British Library Hughes-Baskin Papers. Vol. I. 1958-1972 Add.Ms.83684)

Gaudete finished

Jan. 23 - BBC - Voss (talk about Patrick White's book. Published in The Listener:71. 6 Feb 1964)

Jan. 28 - Accepts an invitation to become a member of the Poetry Panel of The Arts Council of Great Britain.(V & A, Arts Council Archive)

Awarded lecturer's salary at University of Vienna for 5 years, by Abraham Woursell Foundation (PR 62)

Feb. 12 - BBC - Dogs: A Scherzo (play produced)

April 10 - BBC - The Worst Journey in the World by Cherry-Garrard (talk about Cherry Garrard's book)

April 26 - BBC - Zbigniew Herbert (reading of Herbert's poems)

May 9 - BBC - Nessie the Mannerless Monster (reading)

Nov. 21 to Dec. 30 - BBC - The Coming of the Kings (play produced)

Reviews: Voss , White; Myth and Religion of the North , Turvielle-Petre; The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen , Day Lewis; Selections of African Prose , Whiteley; The Heroic Recitations of the Bahima of Ankole , Morris; Somali Poetry , Andrzejewski and Lewis; The Three Christs of Ypsilanti , Rokeach; Letters of Alexander Pushkin , Shaw; Astrology , MacNeice; Ghost and Divining-rod , Lethbridge / Shamanism , Eliade; The Sufis , Shah (probably written in 1962, see Bitter Fame p. 320); Mysterious Senses , Dröscher; Heimskringla , The Prose Edda , Sturlson; Gods, Demons and Others , Narayan.

1965

March - Ariel , Sylvia Plath, (Ed)

June - Eat Crow (play) (parts of Difficulties of a Bridegroom)

Autumn - Modern Poetry in Translation (Editorial)

Autumn - 'The Tiger's Bones' (play); 'Beauty and the Beast'(play)

October - Letter to Leonard Baskin: 'Book of Crow has developed... Are you still interested in a brief series of Crow adventures?' (discovered 2013 by Peter Fydler in the British Library Hughes–Baskin Papers. Vol. I. 1958-1972 Add.Ms.83684)

The Crow poems were begun at request of Baskin to accompany drawings. (Scigaj, L. Form and Imagination (1986) p.144).(UU 97).

'... mostly they wrote themselves quite rapidly, the story was a sort of machine that assembled them'. (UU 207)

Jan - 'Sylvia Plath' (note on Ariel)

Feb. 17 - BBC - Eat Crow (extract)

March 3 - Alexandra Tatiana Eloise Wevill (Shura) born

April - The Genius of Isaac Belshevis Singer' (essay)

June 17 - BBC - 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning' (introduction and reading)

June/July - Attends the Festival dei Due Mondi. Spoleto.

Sept. 3 - BBC 3 – Reading 3 poems at 'Poets in Public', Edinburgh Festival.

Sept. 30 - 'The House of Donkeys' (re-telling of Japanese folk-tale)

Oct. 17 – BBC – Reading 'Ghost Crabs', 'Waking', 'Gog III' from play - Difficulties of a Bridegroom – ' my Alchemical Marriage ' (Letter to Ben Sonnenberg, Summer. 1965)

Nov. 22 - BBC - 'The Brother's Dream', (reading)

Nov. 22 to Dec. 3 - BBC - The Tiger's Bones ; Beauty and the Beast (plays produced)

Reviews: Faber Book of Ballads , Hodgart; Men who Marched Away , Parsons;
Literature Among the Primitives , T he Primitive Reader , Greenaway.

BBC - (poetry readings, talks)

1966

Oct - The Burning of the Brothel (LE 300)

Founded and helped to organise, together with Patrick Garland and Charles Osborne, the first big Arts Council International Poetry Festival, which took place in 1967.
Reading with Auden and Neruda. (PR 73)

Summer - 'Vasco Poppa' (essay)

Sept. 22 - BBC - The Price of a Bride (play produced)

Oct. 24 - BBC - The Poetry of Vasco Poppa (talk)

Autumn - On The Chronological Order of Plath's Poems (notes)

Reviews: Dylan Thomas Letters, Fitzgibbon

BBC - (poetry reading, talks)

1967

Jan - Recklings (LE 150)

April - Scapegoats and Rabies (LE 400)

May - Wodwo 'a descent into destruction of some sort' (UU 205)

Aug - Animal Poems (LE 100)

Dec - Poetry in the Making (texts of broadcasts)

'Gravestones' (BS) (LE 40)

First Crow poems published: 'Three Legends', 'A Battle', 'Lovesong'

June 6 - BBC - Wodwo (reading poems)

July 16 - BBC - Poetry International '67 (speaking and reading; broadsheet and programme notes)

Sept. 21 to Oct. 5 - BBC - The Head of Gold (play produced)

1968

Feb - The Iron Man (story) 'I just wrote it out as I told it over two or three nights' (IOS 5.9.93)

Dec - Five Autumn Songs (LE 500)

March - A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse (Introduction)

July - Yehuda Amichai: Selected Poems (collaborated on trans.)

Aug - The Oedipus of Seneca (TH's adaptation of Seneca for Peter Brook) '... concentrated my writing... useful in Crow' (UU 212)

Beauty and the Beast (play)

Many Crow poems published.

March 19 - Seneca's Oedipus (TH adaptation) performed (Old Vic)

March - The Demon of Adachigahara (libretto) Setting by Crosse, performed at Shrewsbury.

May 2 - BBC - Sean, the Fool, the Devil and the Cats (play produced)

July 8 - BBC - Isaac Rosenberg (reading Rosenberg's poems)

Five Autumn Songs written for and read at Harvest Festival, Little Missenden.

Autumn - Reading poetry at Peacock Theatre, Dublin.

August 25 - BBC - The Battle of Aughrim (reading 'Rappareas', 'Wolfhound' and 'Battle Hill Revisited' in a broadcast of the epic poem by Richard Murphy). Recorded in Dublin on August 3.

Dec. 12 - BBC - Yehuda Amichai (introducing and reading poems translated from the Hebrew by Assia Wevill)

The Arvon Foundation Established by John Fairfax and John Moat. '... I thought the scheme was unworkable'. Involved with first course in Devon and was converted. 'I spent no small volume of time and cash on it' (Letter to AS , Aug. 1993).

BBC - (poetry and play readings)

Reviews: Folk tales of Chile , Dawson; Hindoo Fairy Tales , Frere; The Glass man and the Golden Bird , Manning-Sanders; The Black Monkey , Hampden.

1969

Dec - Seneca's Oedipus (adaptation)

Feb - Vasco Popa: Selected Poems (Introduction)

'I Said Goodbye to Earth' (BS) (LE 75) (first published Gaudete poem)

Many Crow poems published.

Feb - The New World songs commissioned (performed in 1972)

March 23 - Deaths of Assia and Shura

May 4 - BBC Television - poetry reading

Co-director of Poetry International

Oct. 3 - BBC - The Iron Man (stories and rhymes)

May 13 - Death of Hughes' mother

Death of Sue Alliston

Awarded City of Florence International Poetry Prize

Winter - Co-Editor, with Daniel Weissbort and David Ross, of Your Environment . First issue published (see 'Environment and Society' on the Notes and Queries pages)

1970

March - The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar (LE 100)

March - A Crow Hymn (LE 100)

Sept - The Coming of the Kings (4 plays)

Oct - Crow: from the Life and Songs of the Crow

Oct - A Few Crows (LE 75)

Oct - Amulet (LE 1)

Aug - 'Four Crow Poems'(BS) (LE 20)

Oct - 'Fighting for Jerusalem' (BS) (LE 1)

The Tiger's Bones (play)

The House of Donkeys (part of the play)

Jan - 'The Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems '(Note in The Art of Sylvia Plath)

March - 'Myth and Education' I (NY publication) (essay)

Easter - The Demon Performed at the Orchard Theatre, Bideford, Devon.

May 23 - Poetry D-Day (Reading at the Roundhouse. Two Crow poems)

July 6 - BBC - Crow (introduction, and reading of two poems)

19 August - Marriage to Carol Orchard

Oct. 3 - BBC - Crow (readings)

The Rainbow Press founded by Ted and Olwyn Hughes

Dec. 30 - BBC - Crow (synopsis and readings)

Interview with Ekbert Faas (UU 197-208)

Settings of two poems performed at the Edinburgh festival. 'King of Carrion', 'Eros'.

BBC - (poetry readings, talks)

Reviews: Children's games in Street and Playground , Opie; The Environmental Revolution , Nicholson, The God Beneath the Sea , Garfield/Blishen; The Book of Imaginary Beings , Borges.

1971

March - Shakespeare's Poem (LE 150)

April - Crow Wakes (LE 200)

April - Poems with Ruth Fainlight and Alan Sillitoe.

Nov - Eat Crow (LE 150)

Autumn Song (poster) 'Who killed the Leaves?'

'The Poetry of Ted Hughes' (Sheets) (LE)

May - Fiesta Melons , Plath (Introduction) (LE 150)

Orpheus (verse play)

May - Crossing the Water , Plath (Ed)

Sept - Winter Trees, Plath (Ed. and Note)

Nov - With Fairest Flowers While Summer Lasts: Poems From Shakespeare (Ed. and Introduction) (LE 140)

Nov - A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse (Introduction) First formulation of the 'Tragic Equation'.

Dec - 'The Birth of Socas' (extract from Orghast).

Jan. 29 - BBC - Orpheus (play performed). This broadcast was awarded a Japan Prize for educational content.

March 7 - Reading at the Unterberg Poetry Centre at the 92nd Street Y, New York, USA.

The Conference of the Birds 'I wrote about 100 poems and scenarios for Peter Brook's company to improvise with'. (Conversation with AS , 1995)

Began to look again at the Gaudete material. The underworld the 'most interesting part' of story narrative 'trimmed itself down'. (UU 214)

July-Sept. - Accompanies Peter Brook to Shiraz Festival, Persia. Orghast performed. '... we orchestrated the sounds...' (ABC interview, 1976)

Gaudete rewritten and many more poems added(UU 123)

1972

Feb - Sunday (Story from Wodwo, separate publication by CUP)

Sept - The Coming of the Kings (script)

Oct - Selected Poems 1957 - 67

'A Little Girl's Angel Gaze' (BS) (LE 50)

Nov - Orghast at Persepolis , Smith (excerpts from play; ideas, language and myth)

Works in Progress 5 (Faas Interview)

Aug/Sept - 'The New World' (libretto) Setting by Crosse, performed at The Three Choirs Festival (Worcester.)

Buys Moortown Farm (95 acres) and runs it with Carol and her father, Jack Orchard, who had managed a farm near Crediton. (Conversation with AS , 1995)

Nov. 13 - BBC - Prometheus on his Crag (reading)

Dec. 18 to 21 - BBC - TV The Iron Man read

Reviews: A Separate Reality , Castaneda.

1973

Nov - Prometheus on his Crag (LE 160)

July - Orpheus (play - director's notes)

Stones: Poems by Paul Merchant (Introduction) (LE 150)

March - The Story of Vasco performed (Sadlers Wells)

"Started learning Hebrew, tentatively", Letter to Hana and Yehuda Amichai, Nov. 12
1973

Awarded Premio Internazionale Taormina Prize

1974

Feb - The Story of Vasco (libretto)

July - Sean, the Fool, the Devil and the Cats (script)

July - Beauty and the Beast (script)

Sept - Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter (LE 140)

The House of Donkeys (complete play)

First Cave Birds poems published: 'The Summoner', 'The Executioner', 'The Risen'. '... my starting point was the death of Socrates [and his] murder of the Mediterranean Goddess' (Letter to AS , Nov. 1984).

March 21 - BBC - The Story of Vasco (broadcast: libretto by Hughes)

Sees Baskin bird-drawings. Begins bird drama - Cave Birds

Reads A.K.Ramanujan's Speaking of Siva and begins to write his own vacanas, some of which will be published in the Gaudete Epilogue (1977) and in Orts (1978).

Awarded Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

1975

March - The Interrogator (LE 250) ('A Titled Vulturess')

March - Cave Birds (Scolar Press: LE 125)

Oct - Season Songs

May - 'Cave Birds' (10 poems) (Scolar Press LE 125) (written 1974 -5)

A few Gaudete poems published.

Dec - Children as Writers 2 (Foreword)

April - Reading Crow poems at Cambridge Poetry Festival '[Crow] an expanded story for children' (CU recording)

May 5 - BBC - 'Love Song' (reading)

May 30 - Cave Birds and Lumb's Remains performed (Ilkley Literature Festival). [Cave Birds]'... a mystery play of sorts', [Lumb's Remains] '... constitutes the Epilogue of a longish poem called Gaudete ' (Programme Notes)

June 23 - BBC - Cave Birds read.

1976

May - Earth Moon (LE 226)

July - Eclipse (LE 250)

Nov - Moon Whales

'Moon Hops' (LE 1)

Sept - Janos Pilinsky: Selected Poems (Co-Ed., Introduction)

Words Broadsheet Twenty-Five : Four Poets ('The Virgin Knight') (LE 200)

Feb - Death of Jack Orchard.

March 23 - BBC - Janos Pilinszki (Hughes reads some of his translations)

March - Attends Adelaide Festival (readings and interviews)

May 12 - BBC - Yehuda Amichai (Hughes reads recent work co-translated by himself and Amichai)

Becomes founding President of Farms for City Children charity.

Cambridge Book of English Verse 1939-75 , Bold (parts of an unpublished letter)

'Myth and Education' II (London publication) (Essay)

Arvon Foundation Conversation (Lumb Bank, Arvon Press, 1976)

1977

May - Gaudete

June - Chiasmadon (LE 185)

Aug - Sunstruck (LE 300)

June - Amen , Yehuda Amichai (Co-Translator, Introduction)

Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams , Plath (Introduction, Postscript)

Aug - Platform Performance of Gaudete (National Theatre)

Sept. 6 to 13 - BBC - TH introduces and reads from Season Songs.

Second interview with Ekbert Faas (UU 208-215)

Awarded OBE

1978

Feb - Moon Bells

July - A Solstice (LE 100)

Aug - Orts (LE 200)

Oct - Cave Birds

Oct - Moortown Elegies (LE 150)

'Moortown Elegies' (BS) (LE 100)

'The Head', (story)

June - Vasco Popa: Collected Poems (Introduction)

Recording for Norwich Tapes, Critical Forum Series: ... [poetry/magic] 'is one way of making things happen the way you want them to happen'.

1979

Jan - The Threshold (LE 100)

April - Remains of Elmet (LE 180) 'written in response to Fay Godwin's photographs... first poems reflected my mother's love of this area' . The 1994 reprinting had a different aim: 'I deliberately made this version a collection about my family'. (Conversation with AS, 1994)

April - Remains of Elmet (LE 180)

Aug - Four Tales Told by an Idiot (LE 450)

Nov - Adam and the Sacred Nine (LE 200) '... to conjure myself to be a bit more birdlike' (PR 72)

Oct - Moortown

Dec - Henry Williamson (tribute) (LE 200)

Morrigu Press (BS, 3 poems) (LE 30)

'Brooktrout' (BS) (LE 60)

'Pan' (BS) (LE 60)

'Woodpecker' (BS) (LE 60)

'In the Black Chapel' (BS) (LE 1500) for V & A exhibition.

'Wolverine' (BS) (LE 75)

'You hated Spain', 'Salmon Taking Times', The Earthenware Head'.

Awarded Signal Poetry Prize for Moon Bells

May 20 - ITV TH reads poems from Remains of Elmet .

Poems in All Round the Year, Morpurgo.

Dec - Tribute to Henry Williamson read at St Martin's in the Fields

Voted best poet writing in English in small New Poetry poll (BBC - Internet News , October 29, 1998)

August - Fishing in Iceland with Nicholas

12 Sept/28 Oct - Exhibition of 'Illustrations to Ted Hughes Poems' at Victoria and Albert Museum, London

1980

'Eagle' (BS) (LE 75)

'Mosquito' (BS) (LE 60)

'Tapir's Song' (BS) (LE 15)

'Sky Furnace' (BS) (LE 150)

'The Tigerboy' (story)

Oct - The Reef and Other Poems , Sagar (Introduction)

New Poetry 6 (Ed.)

March 2 - BBC - Interview: comments on his early poems

May 3 - BBC - Elmet (reading nine poems from Remains of Elmet

May 10 - BBC - Moortown (reading four poems from Moortown

May 10 - BBC - Moortown (reading nine poems from Moortown

July 7 - Fishing in Alaska with Nicholas

Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe , Faas (interviews, essays, reviews collected)

The Pig Organ (libretto) . Setting, Blackford, performed (Roundhouse, London)

Nov. - Sets up and judges (with Heaney, Larkin, and Causley)The Observer/Arvon Foundation Poetry Competition.

BBC - (poetry readings)

1981

March - Under the North Star

July - A Primer of Birds (LE 250)

'Three River Poems' (BS) (LE 75)

'Cows' (BS) (LE 76)

The Way To Write , Fairfax and Moat (Introduction)

Ted Hughes: A Critical Study , Gifford / Roberts (poem and extracts from letters)

Collected Poems , Plath (Ed., Introduction)

'In Defence of Crow' (essay)

Death of Hughes' father

1982

Feb - New Selected Poems 1957 - 81

July - Wolf-watching (LE 75)

'The Great Irish Pike' (Sheets) (LE 26)

The Rattle Bag (Ed. with Seamus Heaney)

The Journals of Sylvia Plath (Co-Ed., Foreword)

Arvon Foundation Poetry Comp. 1980 Anthology (Co-judge, part of Intro.)

What Rhymes with Secret , Brownjohn (Foreword)

July - Awarded honorary degree from Exeter University.

Oct - Reading at the Cheltenham, Literature Festival

Reviews: Where I Used to Play on the Green , Glyn Hughes

1983

Sept - River. Sally Beamish was inspired by these poems to write Cello Concerto No.1: River, for the cellist Robert Cohen. BBC Broadcast, March 22, 2002.

'Mice are Funny Little Creatures' (BS) (LE 75)

'Weasels at Work' (BS) (LE 75)

'Flying Insects' (BS) (LE 75)

Modern Poetry in Translation , Weissbort (Introduction)

Awarded Signal Poetry Prize, together with Seamus Heaney, for The Rattle Bag

Fishing in Alaska with Nicholas

Attends International Festival of Authors in Toronto, Canada

1984

June - What is the Truth ('... written at the suggestion of C and M Morpurgo who run Farms for City Children' (PBS Notes, Autumn, 1995)

The Complete Prints of Leonard Baskin ('The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly' - Introduction).

Where I Used to Play on the Green , G. Hughes (Introduction)

Dec. 23 - 'Rain Charm for the Duchy' (poem for the christening of HRH Prince Harry. The Observer)

Feb. 23 - BBC - Oedipus (Hughes' adaptation of Seneca's play)

Britain: The World by Itself , Perring and Press (poem and prose passage)

July 28 - BBC - A Celebration for Frances Horovitz (Hughes reads five River poems)

'Subsidy for Poetry' (essay)

Dec - Appointed Poet Laureate.

1985

Mokomaki (LE 50)

The Best Worker in Europe (LE 150)

Sylvia Plath's Selected Poems (Ed.)

29 Dec - 'The Dream of the Lion', 'Little Salmon Song', poems for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, published in The Observer

Awarded Signal Poetry Prize for What is the Truth?

45 Contemporary Poems , Turner (poem and essay)

'Putting a value on UK's salmon riches' (letter)

1986

Aug - Fangs the Vampire Bat and the Kiss of Truth

Oct - Flowers and Insects

21 April - 'A Birthday Masque' (poem for the sixtieth birthday of Her Majesty the Queen, published in The Times)

23 July - 'The Song of the Honey-Bee' (poem for the wedding of HRH Prince Andrew)

and Sarah Ferguson, published in The Daily Telegraph).

'The Whistle'; 'Group'; 'Circuit', poems by Sorescu (TH Trans.)

Jan - ITV The Iron Man, readings by Tom Baker begin

July - BBC TV, Terry Wogan Show - The Honey Bee and the Thistle, 'The Song of the Honey-Bee' set to music by Howard Blake, soloist: Aled Jones, Finchley Children's Choir, Howard Blake (piano), David Snell(harp) and Gary Kettel (tubular bells).

Sept 21 - Reading at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey, USA

Sept 22 - Reading at the Unterberg Poetry Centre at the 92nd Street Y, New York, USA.

Oct. - Platform performance of Gaudete at The Almeida Theatre, London.

William Golding , Carey ('Baboons and Neanderthals' - Essay)

'Children and secretly listening adults' (letter)

'About the Arvon Foundation' (notes)

Award of honorary degree from Cambridge University

1987

Aug - T.S. Eliot: A Tribute (LE 150)

Sept - The Cat and the Cuckoo (LE 2000, 250 signed)

The Cat and the Cuckoo poems and prints (LE 200 ea.) '... my wish was to capitalise on a character study of the creature&hellip... My model was runic knots... mnemonic quipus ' (PBS Notes, Autumn 1995)

The Complete Poems of Keith Douglas , Graham (Introduction)

The Singing Brink , Dooley and Hunter, (Introduction)

'An Introduction to 'The Thought Fox'' (Essay)

'To parse or not to parse' (letter)

'On Sylvia Plath's biographers' (letter)

'No chance for fishery interests' (letter)

'The place where Sylvia Plath should rest in peace' (letter)

'Sylvia Plath: the facts about her life and the desecration of her grave' (letter)

'Where research becomes intrusion' (letter)

Summer - Fishing in British Columbia, where he has an emergency appendix operation

Sept 26 - Reads 'The Truly Great' at the unveiling of a blue plaque on the London house occupied (1957-1965) by T.S.Eliot. Published as T.S.Eliot: A Tribute (LE) and in A Dancer to God, 1992)

1988

June - Tales of the Early World (fables)

Began writing The Iron Woman '... at one point I was scared by it and had to back off' (IOS)

An Anthology of Poetry for Shakespeare , Osborne (Foreword)

First and Always , Sail (Introduction)

20 Dec - 'Two Songs' The first of these two poems written for HRH Princess Beatrice of York is published in The Daily Telegraph

Letters to an Editor , Fisher (includes letters from TH)

Sept. 25 - Reads 'The Song of Songs in the Valley of Bones' (published as 'A Dancer to God', 1992) as an introduction to a reading of T.S.Eliot's The Waste Land at the Palace Theatre, London

Sept 26 - Reads 'A Dancer to God' at the T.S.Eliot Centenary Dinner

1989

Sept - Moortown Diary

Sept - Wolfwatching 'doubting my powers and getting older. Of course both wolves are caged and confined'. (Conversation with AS Dec. 1994)

Writing The Goddess of Complete Being, 'The Silence of Cordelia'

In Praise of Trout , Profumo (Foreword)

Notes on Wolfwatching (PBS Bulletin)

Nov - Visits Bangladesh for the Asia Poetry Festival

1990

Capriccio (LE 50)

Sean Hill's Gidleigh Park Cookbook , (Foreword)

4 Aug. - 'A Masque for Three Voices', poem for the ninetieth birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, published in The Weekend Telegraph

Gabbioano , Pennati (Facsimile of letter from TH)

Dear (Next) Prime Minister , Astley (includes letter from TH)

Three Contemporary Poets , Dyson (includes 'A Reply to Critics' and excerpts form letter)

Suffers from shingles until March 1991 (THL 590-1)

Is instrumental in the inauguration of the Sacred Earth Drama Trust and its drama competition (see 'Environment and Society' on the Notes and Queries pages)

1991

Winning Words (Judge, and Foreword)

1992

April - Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being (prose)

June - Rain Charm for the Duchy (LE 280) and trade edition.

Sept - A Dancer to God (tribute to Eliot)

6 Feb. – 'The Unicorn', poem written for the fortieth anniversary of the Accession of HRH Queen Elizabeth II, published in The Daily Telegraph

Nov - Your World (Essay) (The Observer Magazine)

March 22 - BBC - Shakespeare and the Goddess (interview with Nigel Forde)

March 25 - BBC - "Ted Hughes tries to write a bright and breezy breakfast celeal advert"

March - 'The Interpretation of Parables' (article)

April 12 - BBC - Raincharm for the Duchy (introduction and reading)

April 5 - BBC - Shakespeare and the Goddess (interview with Clive Wilmer)

April 19 - BBC - Capriccio (Introduction and reading of four poems)

April 26 - BBC - Emily Dickinson (Hughes reads a selection of her poems)

April - 'Shakespeare and the Goddess' , 'Battling Over the Bard'(reply to review)

'Ted Hughes and the Plath estate' (letter)

Oct - Cheltenham Literary Festival reading - 'The Bear'

Reviews: Your World, (winning photographs UN competition.)

BBC - (poetry readings)

1993

May - The Mermaid's Purse (LE 100) - 'not as warm as The Cat and The Cuckoo '
(Conversation with AS , Oct. 93)

June - Three Books - 'Reading your book [Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest] galvanised
[Fabers] into publishing Elmet , Cave Birds and River as a single volume' (Letter to AS ,
Aug. 1995)

Sept - The Iron Woman (story) '... a myth about writing a poem' (IOS)

'The Reckless Head' (BS) (LE)

Sept - Sacred Earth Dramas (Foreword)

'The Bear'

'The Deadfall'(story)

Working on Coleridge essay - 'like an afterbirth of the Shakespeare work' (Conversation
with AS , Oct . 1993)

Suffers from shingles

Talks about 'the catharsis of memorialising the dead in books' (IOS)

Enthusiasm for Tony Buzan's experiments for developing brain and memory (IOS)

Oct - 'I realise after all these years, that people don't understand my poetry'
(Conversation with AS)

Nov 15 - Rock version of The Iron Man Directed by David Thacker, and produced by rock-guitarist Pete Townshend opens at The Young Vic, London

1994

March - Winter Pollen

July - Poetry (in Macedonian) (LE 500)

Oct - Elmet 'I deliberately made this version a collection about my family'. (Conversation with AS, 1994)

Dec - Earth Dances (LE 250)

Nov - After Ovid , Hoffman and Lasdun (includes four versions of Metamorphoses poems)

Writes 'Anamnemonica'(unmemorable) poems for Tony Buzan's Memoriad competition. (Guardian 8.8.94)

March 1 and 2 - BBC - The Iron Woman (read by Janet McTeer and Jonathan Hyde)

April/May(?) - Reading, with Seamus Heaney, at Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre (Letters of Seamus Heaney, 8 May 1994)

Invested as Golden Wreath Laureate of the year at the Macedonia Poetry Festival in Struga

Sets aside work on Alcestis to start work on a version of the Oresteia by Aeschylus,(commissioned by the Northcott Theatre, Exeter): '..the best thing I have ever done. I read it and wonder how I ever did it' (Conversation with AS Sept, 1998)

Oct 6 - Reading for Poetry Day (National Theatre) with Simon Armitage ('The Earthenware Head', Anniversary', 'The Last of the 1st/5th Lancashire Fusiliers')

'T.S.Eliot the Death of St. Narcissus' (introductory note)

Dec - In London for Sacred Earth Drama Group meeting. 'Valerie Eliot donated £10.000 to group' (Conversation with AS)

Re. The Mermaid's Purse - Reg Lloyd 'disengaged from it and another illustrator found

by Fabers' (Conversation with AS)

1995

March - New Selected Poems

March - The Dream Fighter (stories)

Aug - Spring Awakening (TH's version of Wedekind's play)

Sept - Shakespeare's Ovid (LE 200)

Oct - Difficulties of a Bridegroom (stories)

Oct - Collected Animal Poems (4 Books)

'Football' (poem strip) (LE 499)

'Goku' (Creation story)

Writing more Ovid and writing 'about 100 poems about things I should have resolved thirty years ago. Should have written then, but couldn't.' (Conversation with AS , 1995)

Teaches 'Creativity' to international group of bankers for Tony Buzan's Lichtenstein Global Trust Academy.(BL Add.ms.88918/127.2)

Feb. - Reading at the first Bath Literature Festival

Feb. 27 - BBC Television - Last of the Dinosaurs (Read by Bill Patterson. The first of five "specially commissioned" stories, all published in The Dreamfighter and Other Creation Stories, 1995)

March 6 - BBC Television - The Gambler (story, read by Bill Patterson)

March 13 - BBC Television - Gozzie (story, read by Bill Patterson)

March 20 - BBC Television - The Dreamfighter (story, read by Bill Patterson)

March 27 - BBC Television - Camel (story, read by Bill Patterson)

April 8 - BBC - New Selected Poems (Hughes reading a selection at the Lyttleton Theatre)

March 13 - BBC - After Ovid (reading one poem)

Spring Awakening performed (Barbican) '... powerful and relevant to modern youth'

(Conversation with AS , Oct. 1995)

Paris Review (Spring) interview with Drew Heinz

'Sylvia Plath: the Bell Jar and Ariel ' (essay)

BBC - (poetry readings)

Considering collating archive mss. Asks Keith Sagar and AS to help, but eventually decides he needs to do it himself . 'I found something I thought I had lost' (Conversation with AS , Aug. 1995) 'Something which was lost, which is very interesting'

(Conversation with AS , Sept. 1997)

1996

Blood Wedding (TH 's version of Lorca's play)

BBC broadcast of fragments, 8 July 2007. Full play broadcast 25 Nov. 2007, directed by Pauline Harris

A Choice of Coleridge's Verse (Ed.)

'I also did 25 tales from Ovid's Metamorphoses - enjoyed that. A holiday in a rest home!!' (Letter to AS Sept. 1996)

Jan. 15 - BBC - Ovid's Metamorphoses (reading 'Salamacis and Hermaphrodite' from his own versions of Ovid's Metamorphoses)

March/April Teaches 'Creativity' to international groups of bankers in two 3 week courses for Tony Buzan's Lichtenstein Global Trust Academy.

Oct - Blood Wedding performed (Young Vic), director Tim Supple. 'a difficult play to stage' (Letter to AS , Sept. 1996)

1997

Tales From Ovid (TH's versions of Ovid's Metamorphoses). It won the Whitbread Poetry Prize of the Year)

Shaggy and Spotty (story) '... found in my archive... a story I told the children when they were about two and just jotted notes' (Conversation with AS Sept '97)

By Heart (Ed. and Introduction). '... it worked for Nicholas when he was at school' (Conversation with AS , Sept.1997)

The School Bag , (Ed. with Seamus Heaney)

Again teaches 'Creativity' to international groups of bankers for Tony Buzan's Lichtenstein Global Trust Academy.

Late Spring - Begins treatment for cancer

Sept - Talked about Birthday Letters : '... autobiographical... I chose two [publication] dates using horoscopes, April 23 or an earlier one'. Discussion of the South Bank Mind Olympics and Ted's teaching in a similar course for the Liechtenstein Global Trust Academy. Peter Townshend's musical version of The Iron Man being filmed in America. 'Peter says the script is nothing like my own writing' (Conversation with AS , Sept. 1997)

1998

Jan - Birthday Letters

Phèdra (TH's version of Racine's play)

Howls, Cries & Whispers (LE)

'Did I tell you I translated the Oresteia ?' (Letter to AS , Jan. 1998)

Version of Euripides' Alcestis sent to Barry Rutter of Northern Broadsides (Conversation with AS , Sept. 1998)

Jan - Birthday Letters tops best seller list

Jan - Tales from Ovid wins the Whitbread Book of the Year prize

March - Tales from Ovid wins the W.H. Smith Literature Award

April 21 - BBC - Tales from Ovid (First of ten readings for The Late Book programme)

June - Adds Heracles interlude to Alcestis before sending it to Barry Rutter of Northern Broadsides

Animated version of The Iron Giant being made by Warner Bros.

Phèdra produced (Malvern Literary Festival and Almeida) director Jonathan Kent. 'I heard one woman say 'I wouldn't like to be Diana Rigg and have to go through all that again tonight'. (Conversation with AS , Sept. 1998)

'Sold the farm [Moortown]' (Letter to AS, Aug. 1998)

Oct - Birthday Letters wins Forward Prize for Poetry

Oct - Appointed member of the Queen's Order of Merit

Award of D. Litt. from Cambridge University

Winter - Interview published in Wild Steelhead and Salmon

Ted Hughes died on Wednesday, October 28th

1999

Tales from Ovid (acting version).

The Mermaid's Purse (trade edition)

The Oresteia (TH's version of Aeschylus's play)

Alcestis (TH's version of Euripides's play)

Broadcast BBC - 11 Nov. 2001: produced by Barrie Rutter

'The Prophet' (Version of Pushkin's poem from Weissbort's trans.)

Jan - Birthday Letters wins T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry.

Birthday Letters wins the South Bank Award for Literature.

Birthday Letters wins the Whitbread Prize for Poetry and the Book of the Year prize.

April - Tales from Ovid performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Swan, Stratford.

The post of Children's Laureate, founded at the instigation of Ted Hughes and Michael Morpurgo, is filled, for the first time, by Quentin Blake.

May 13 - Memorial Service at Westminster Abbey

August - The Iron Giant Brad Bird's animated version of The Iron Man is distributed by Warner Bros.

Dec - The Oresteia performed at the National Theatre

Dec. 3 - BBC - The Oresteia (discussion of Katie Mitchell's production at the National Theatre)

2000

Opening of the archive of Ted Hughes manuscripts at Emory University, Atlanta, USA.

September - Alcestis produced by Barry Rutter of the Northern Broadsides Theatre Company at Dean Clough, Halifax, Yorkshire.

2003

Ted Hughes: Collected Poems , edited by Paul Keegan.

2005

Ted Hughes: Collected Poems for Children , Illustrated by Raymond Briggs.

2007

Letters of Ted Hughes : selected and edited by Christopher Reid

2009

September - Timmy the Tug : a children's book created by Ted Hughes and the artist, Jim Downer, in 1952

2010

March - The Dean of Westminster, John Hall, announces that Ted Hughes is to be honoured by a memorial in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey.

June - The British Library announces the opening of a large addition to their Ted Hughes archive.

2011

December 6 - Dedication of the Memorial to Ted Hughes in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey. Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney, unveiled the memorial stone of Kirkstone green slate, carved by Ronald Parsons with these lines from 'That Morning': ' So we found the end of our journey. So we stood, alive in the river of light Among the creatures of light creatures of light '.

ABC Australian Broadcasting Corporation

AS Ann Skea

BBC TP British Broadcasting Corporation Tape

BF Stevenson, A. Bitter Fame , Viking, London, 1989

CU Cambridge University

DT The Daily Telegraph

IOS Independent on Sunday, Interview: 5 September 1993 pp.32-4

PBS Poetry Book Society, London

PR Paris Review, Interview, Spring 1995

SPJ, Hughes and McCullough (Eds.), The Journals of Sylvia Plath , Ballantine, NY, 1991

SPL II, Steinberg, P. and Kukil, K (Eds.), Sylvia Plath's Letters Volume II, Faber, London, 2018.

SPLH Plath, A.(Ed.), Sylvia Plath: Letters Home , Harper and Row, NY, 1975

SW Malcolm, J. The Silent Woman, Picador, London, 1994

THL Reid, C.(Ed.)Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, London, 2007

UU Faas, E. The Unaccommodated Universe , Black Sparrow, Santa Barbara, 1980

WP Hughes, T. Winter Pollen , Faber, London, 1994.

Sagar, K and Tabor, S. Ted Hughes : A Bibliography, 1946-1995 , 2nd Edition, Mansell, London, 1998

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"What is the difference between a raven and a writing desk?" asked the Hatter.
"Come, we shall have some fun now!" thought Alice. "I'm glad they've begun asking
riddles – I believe I can guess that," she added aloud.
(From Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll).

On this page you will find links to notes and answers to questions about Ted Hughes' work.

Questions are listed alongside the subject or the title of the book in which the poem or work first appeared.

If you are using Ted Hughes: Collected Poems, the original book title is at the foot of the left-hand page.

Click on the Title to get to the answers and notes.

Answers are based on my own knowledge and my own interpretation of Hughes' work. Other interpretations are possible.

The titles of poems and other works mentioned in the queries are highlighted in green.

Abbreviations used: THCP = Ted Hughes: Collected Poems; WP = Ted Hughes: Winter Pollen (Ed. Scammell, Faber, 1994); LTH = Letters of Ted Hughes, (Ed. Reid, Faber, 2006).

Title

Questions. Click on the title of that section to see more.

Copyright

"Why can't I find any of Ted Hughes's poems on the internet?"

"I want to reproduce one of Ted Hughes's poems to display with my artwork, do I need permission?"

"I am trying to obtain theatrical rights to produce Spring Awakening. Who currently owns the rights to the Ted Hughes translation?"

"Does copyright apply to these 'Notes and Queries' pages?"

Biography

"When the subject is somebody else, the accounts & reports & interpretations sound plausible. When it's yourself you realize what the creative demon is... the world of biography is a world of lies. Perverse lies, too, mainly". (Ted Hughes, in a letter to Keith Sagar. 10. June, 1988).

"Where can I find out more about Ted Hughes's life? Is there a biography?"

“Where might I find photographs of Ted Hughes for use in my book?”

“What time of day were Hughes and Plath married? As an astrologer, I would like to cast the chart for their wedding to see if it sheds light on their marriage”.

“What is the origin of the quotation which Ted Hughes chose for the headstone on Sylvia Plath’s grave?”

‘A Pink Wool Knitted Dress’ (THCP 1064). Notes.

British Library Ted Hughes Archive: Notes on Add Ms 88918/129/2: (25 Sept. 2014)

These notes outline the contents of this archive, including a précis of a number of diary-like pages, and details of their links to published work by both Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath. Hughes’ page of notes on the events of the days immediately prior to Plath’s death is included.

Reading and understanding a Ted Hughes poem.

“Finally poems belong to the reader – just as houses belong to those who live in them not to the builder” (Ted Hughes, in a letter to Keith Sagar. THL 23 May 1974).

“What is the meaning of the flander, waif and idiot images in Hughes’ poems; some of the contents are difficult to understand. What does he really want to express?”

“I am about to teach one of Ted Hughes’ poems to my class but other teachers have told me that my interpretation of the poem is wrong.”

“I do not have a background in English literature but have been asked to write an essay about the images of nature present in Ted Hughes’ poem ‘Relic’ (THCP 78). Can you suggest how I should approach this?”

“I have been asked to discuss the metre and rhythms of Ted Hughes’s poem ‘Wind’ (THCP 36). How do I do this?”

The Environment and Society

Hughes involvement with ecology – poems, essays, letters, The Sacred Earth Drama Trust, Your Environment magazine.

“I am told that there is social commentary and ecological activism ‘hidden’ in Ted Hughes’s poems and I have to take part in a seminar discussing this. I have looked everywhere for information about this, can you help?”

Ted Hughes and Religion

"I am interested Ted Hughes' religious background and in his use of religion and religious imagery in his poems, especially as inspiration for such poems as 'Theology'"

NOTE on the British Library Ted Hughes Archive: Add. Ms 88918/9/9 in which Hughes discusses his relationship with the divinity.

Ted Hughes and History

"My project is to examine the influence of history in the work of Ted Hughes; and how this might influence us.

Would you consider Cabbala as 'history which influenced Hughes' poems'?"

Ted Hughes' Papers in the British Library

Roy Davids (archivist, collector, and friend of Ted and Carol Hughes) worked with these papers for six months before they were sold to the British Library. This essay contains his informed and valuable reflections on the papers and their contents.

Ted Hughes and the Arvon Foundation

In 1968 poet, John Moat, approached Hughes with the idea of a scheme in which would-be writers could work with established writers in a secluded place for five days, learning and creating. Hughes was initially sceptical but once John Moat and fellow poet, John Fairfax, implemented their plan he became a strong supporter both practically and financially.

The Hawk in the Rain (1957)

"Ted has said that 'song' (THCP 24) was his first 'real' poem, written when he was 18 or 19. Is this true?"

"I have heard that Ted Hughes once worked at the London Zoo and that the poem 'the Jaguar' (THCP 19) was written there. What sort of work did he do?"

'the Thought Fox' (THCP 21). Notes.

Lupercal (1960)

"Almost all the poems in Lupercal were written as invocations to writing. My main consciousness in those days was that it was impossible to write. So these invocations were just attempts to crack the apparent impossibility of producing anything". Ted Hughes in an interview with Ekbert Faas (1977). Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980. p.209.

"I am a French student and I have to translate the poem 'thrushes'(THCP 82). What is the meaning of 'attent' in "attent sleek thrushes", and 'hosanna' in "Orgy and hosanna"?"

"I need to trace the inner structure and coherence of Lupercal. In your essay 'Regeneration in Remains of Elmet' you say that Lupercal begins and ends with poems which symbolically and ritually evoke the creative energies. Could you make this statement clearer? How does the double meaning of the Lupercalia as both fertility and purification rite relate to this statement?"

'The Perfect Forms' (THCP 82). "Concerning your interpretation of this poem in your book (Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest), what does the comparison between Buddha and Priapus mean in your opinion? What is the meaning of Socrates being born under Pisces?"

'Sunstroke' (THCP 96). "What is the meaning of 'Sunstroke' with its hallucinatory quality?"

'Crag Jack's Apostasy' (THCP 84). 'Familiar'(THCP 691) "Who was Crag Jack?"

'Nicholas Ferrer' (THCP 69-70.) "Who was Nicholas Ferrer? What is the meaning of 'In the Atlantic holes tire-'?"

"To what does 'some vigorous souls// That had Englished for Elizabeth' refer and what does 'Englished' mean?"

"What does 'crabbed' mean in "the tree that crabbed// In Cromwell's belly as it bloomed in Rome" ? What does Rome have to do with the context and what is the meaning of 'as' here?"

'the Retired Colonel' (THCP 77). Notes.

'Hawk Roosting' (THCP 68). Notes.

Wodwo (1967)

"Author's Note: The stories and the play in this book may be read as notes, appendix and unversified episodes in the events behind the poems, or as chapters of a single adventure to which the poems are commentary and amplification. Either way, the verse and the prose are intended to be read together, as parts of a single work".

"I have difficulty understanding 'the Rain Horse' (Wodwo pp.45-55; also published in Difficulties of a Bridegroom (1995)). What do you suggest?"

"'Karma' (THCP 167), refers to a number of historical events which I cannot make out. In particular, the lines concerning Victoria and the Chou emperors. Can you help? And

how about the millions of Zion? And the Irish?"

"I do not understand Ted's idea that all the pieces of Wodwo were designed to stand together as part of a single work. What am I missing?"

"I am looking for some help with a deconstructive and feminist analysis of the poem 'theology' (THCP 161). It would be very helpful if you could point me in the right direction. I am also looking for the date of this poem as I have been unable to trace it".

"Is 'Second Glance at a Jaguar' (THCP 151) related to the poem 'The Jaguar' (THCP 19) in any ways?"

'Out' (THCP 165) and 'Last of the 1st/5th Lancashire Fusiliers' (THCP 950). Notes.

The Iron Man (1968)

"Do I need permission to reproduce the drawing of The Iron Man which is on your web page?"

"Where might I find things to supplement lessons on The Iron Man for primary school children. I would like to bring the story to life so that they will never forget it?"

"I have to discuss the symbolism, the literary content and the author's purpose in The Iron Man. Can you suggest some background reading?"

"Why did Ted Hughes choose the name 'Hogarth' for the little boy in The Iron Man?"

The Iron Man Musical: Notes

Orghast (1971)

"Where can I find a copy of this work?"

Crow (1972)

"In Crow, my notion was, again to re-simplify my language but simultaneously to break it out of dependence on a sacred object for subject – to make it narrative and in a way lyrical-dramatic" (Ted Hughes, in a letter to Anne-Lorraine Bujon. LTH. 16 Dec. 1992.

"I have read that Ted felt that he never finished Crow and that the real intention of the work was not fully realized. It appears that there are many limited editions of Crow poems and I understand that there are numerous drafts of unfinished or abandoned Crow poems in the Emory University Ted Hughes Archive in Atlanta, U.S.A. Do you think that these will ever be collected for publication?".

"I have chosen to write an essay about 'Crow's Theology' (THCP 227). I was wondering

if you could tell me if Ted Hughes was an atheist, and is Crow meant to be an amalgam of man and nature, or is it a guise for Hughes to hide behind as he vents his anger on God?”.

“I have a question concerning Ted Hughes poem ‘Lovesong’ (THCP 255). Did he write it in as the answer Sylvia Plath’s unpublished poem, ‘Mad Girl’s Lovesong’?”.

‘Crow Goes Hunting’ (THCP 236). Notes.

‘Crow Alights’ (THCP 220). Notes.

‘Crow’s Elephant Totem Song’ (THCP 238). Notes.

Gaudete (1977)

Gaudete. Notes

Critics have argued that the body, and in particular the female body, suffers in the central narrative of Gaudete. Did Hughes want to expose the controlling power of the patriarchal society over female consciousness?

And what does Lumb represent?

Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama (1978)

A detailed discussion of all the poems in Cave Birds, together with their relationship to the Alchemical process, can be read in Ann Skea, Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest (e-book)

“ Why is ‘The guide’ in the Scholar Press edition of Cave Birds called ‘A Scarecrow Swift’? How is this related to the alchemical pocess and the symbol of the cross which represents the four elements – air, earth, fire and water and the four qualities – hot, dry, wet and cold? Is it a representation of the purification of the soul? ” .

Moortown (1979)

Remains of Elmet (1979)

Elmet (1994)

“Where is Moortown Farm, and do Elmet and Heptonstall still exist?”

“Was Ted thinking of Handel’s Messiah as he wrote ‘the Word that Space Breathes’?”

‘two’ (THCP 480)and ‘Anthem for Doomed Youth’ (THCP 761). Notes.

Historical background information about John Wesley and the Calder Valley. ‘For Billy

Holt' (THCP 483). Note.

"Churn-Milk Joan'. Notes"

River (1983)

The Origin and Publication of River. Notes.

"I am a Geography teacher who has for many years taught pupils about rivers. I plan to introduce some of Ted Hughes' River but some of the ideas and imagery may be difficult for the age range (Year 7. 11 years old). The two poems I have in mind are 'The Kingfisher' (THCP 662) and 'River' (THCP 664), and I am very interested in the cycle or hydrological cycle implied within 'River'. I understand most of the references with the exception of:

Through him, God / Marries a pit /Of fishy mire
and

...Broken by the world. / ...In dumbness uttering spirit brightness / ...Scattered... / After swallowing death and the pit.

I would be grateful for some advice or simple analysis. I notice that in both poems he refers to a pit. I am not sure if that is a connection or not. "

"Who are the "we" in the poem 'that Morning' (THCP 209)? Do the salmon represent knowledge and the river imagination?."

"Why are the bears in 'that Morning' called "creatures of light", do they have any mythological associations?"

Flowers and Insects (1986)

"Who was Norman Nicholson to whom the poem 'tern: for Norman Nicholson' (THCP 720) is dedicated?"

Wolfwatching (1989)

"Who is Lord Savile in 'Anthem for Doomed Youth'? (THCP 761)"

Birthday Letters (1998)

Capriccio (Limited Edition 1990)

Howls and Whispers (Limited Edition 1998)

"The women characters in Birthday Letters, Howls & Whispers and Capriccio are unnamed but are referred to as "you", "she" or "her". Is Hughes' concealment of identity

intended to protect his privacy? What was his intention?"

"Can you identify 'Lyonesse'? It appears in Birthday Letters and in Plath's work, too, I think".

"One thing puzzles me about Hughes' use of the Sephiroth as a structure in Birthday Letters, Howls & Whispers and Capriccio. In The Sufis Idries Shah points out, "The alteration of basic Cabbalism (from eight elements to ten) deprived the Western development of the system of a great deal of its meaning and usefulness. Hebrew and Christian Cabbala later than the 12th century is therefore only of partial meaning. This includes all aspects of the Cabbala of ten elements as distinct from the 'Eight Cabbala'" "Given that Hughes seems to have recognized Shah as an authority, why do you think he chose to ignore Shah's information when he structured the Birthday Letters using the ten elements? And why do you think he chose not to refer to it (Shah's information) when writing about the Kabbalah's possible influence in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being?"

'Caryatids (2)' (THCP 1046). Notes.

'You Hated Spain' (THCP1068). Notes.

'A Pink Wool Knitted Dress' (THCP1064-5). Notes.

Howls and Whispers (Limited Edition 1998)

'Paris 1954' (THCP 1173-4). "the first claret he ever tasted": Olwyn Hughes' comments.

'the Offers'(THCP 1181-3). "And suddenly you were sitting in your own home./... Like/ A hallucination": Olwyn Hughes's identification of the second woman.

Alcestis (1999)

"I will be acting in a production of Alcestis, can you tell me anything about Ted Hughes' translation/adaptation?"

Uncollected

"In 'Lobby From Under the Carpet', (THCP 837) what is the meaning of "Ticks the tittering tock"? What is the meaning of "And he goes off half-cock"? And who are "Professor Skakkebaek" and "The Premier"?"

'Anniversary' (THCP 854). Notes.

Plays

"In 1961, Ted wrote: 'I'm just finishing a play---a real play. No resemblance to that other at all. 8 people wake up on a desert island without memory---or with only floating fragments of memory'. Can you identify this play?"

"In a letter to Richard Murphy (LTH 9 March 1965) , Ted wrote: 'And on writing radio plays. I've brought one long work out of it---a drama in about 7 scenes, highly poetical & theatrical, which has been amusing to compose & which may have hidden virtues. Most of its visible qualities are vices. It's a sort of Alchemical Marriage, I now realise, though it began as a grand demolishing of in-laws". Can you identify this play?"

"Does a manuscript for The House of Taurus exist?"

'The House of Aries' . Notes.

Essays and Prose

"I have to write about Ted Hughes as an essayist but I cannot find material/criticism on this. Can you help?"

Influences: Jung, Graves, Yeats, Oriental philosophy

"Do you know if Ted Hughes was familiar with the work of Jung?"

"You wrote about myth and religion in the work of Ted Hughes, Robert Graves and William Butler Yeats. In what ways did Graves and Yeats influence Ted Hughes?"

"Ted Hughes, it seems, was absolutely convinced about Graves' theories about poetry. Does that mean he also believed (in the religious sense of the word) in the White Goddess? Also, do the archetypes you have mentioned in connection with Graves compare at all with Jung's?"

"Many critics have said that Ted Hughes was influenced by oriental philosophy. I want to know whether he was influenced by the Upanishads specifically. Has he ever acknowledged his indebtedness to the Upanishads?"

Cabbala, Mysticism, Shamanism, Sufism, Magic.

"Do you know when Ted Hughes first became interested in Cabbala?"

"You comment in your book (Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest) about the power of mythology in Ted Hughes' work. Can you suggest other works on mysticism, myth and religion which would help when approaching Hughes' work?"

"Do you know of any other theories that relate writing and magic/mysticism together in a scholarly and critically accepted fashion?"

Shamanism and Cabbala: Notes.

Sufism: Notes

Scholars, Post-graduate Students, Researchers

Note

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes, 'An Alchemy' and Shakespeare.

Ann Skea

Part of this paper was presented at the British Library Symposium on Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity on September 15th, 2023.

NOTE: Because of the limits placed on quotations by copyright laws, the reader will need a copy of the poem in front of them. Hughes' much later and far more detailed exposition of his theory in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (Faber 1991) is also frequently referred to in order to elucidate some of the puzzles of the poem. Quotations from 'An Alchemy' (THCP 279–282) are shown in bold italics.

When Ted wrote 'An Alchemy' for a Limited Edition anthology to be published by the Globe Theatre Trust, he expected that readers would recognise Shakespeare's characters and would be familiar with the plays in which they appeared.

The curious structure of his poem, however, with its staggered lines and lack of punctuation, makes strange connections between characters from different plays. In effect, Ted was creating an Alchemical matrix, which was the 'Base Matter' from which he intended to produce the Alchemical 'Gold' of his belief in the Alchemical nature of Shakespeare's works.

He saw Shakespeare's works as 'ritual, transformative drama', and when he sent a copy of his poem to Peter Redgrove in 1973, he told him that it derived from his 'note to my selection of Shakespeare's Verse – about the unity of the poetic theme'¹. Almost 20 years later, he would expound that theme in detail in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* but he had already decided, as he told Redgrove, that 'Not one scholar in a hundred knows Shakespeare well enough to guess whether I have something or haven't. Not one in a hundred of those hundreds has the nose for poetry to know what I'm distinguishing in the total Himalayas of Shakespeare's ore'².

Hughes was not interested in the worldly, laboratory-based alchemy from which modern chemistry derives. His interest was in the spiritual alchemy which began in Italy when, in 1460, Cosimo de Medici, instructed Marsilio Ficino to translate an ancient Greek document, purportedly based on the writings of an Egyptian sage known as Hermes Trismegistus. These Hermetic writings were taken up and further developed by Pico della Mirandola, and, especially, by the Franciscan friar, philosopher and poet, Giordano Bruno, who brought his teachings to England in 1583.

Spiritual alchemy, is based on the Hermetic principle 'As Above: So Below'. It seeks to break down the Base Matter of human nature in order to free it from its impurities and release the Divine Spark (the 'Gold') which is embodied in every human. It involves a continuous process of examination and reformation.

But in Bruno's time, which was also Shakespeare's time, to undertake alchemy in any form was dangerous. The changes produced by an alchemist in a laboratory seemed like magic; and the emphasis in spiritual alchemy on the ability of a human being to change their Divinely allotted place in life skirted very close to heresy, for which Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome in 1600. Alchemical texts, therefore, were written in code, using symbols, metaphor, story-telling, and, especially, poetry.

Iconic alchemical images represent progressive stages in the cyclical process of alchemical purification: The killing of the King (as in Macbeth for example) precedes the dissolution and putrefaction of the Base Matter into a black Crow-like chaos called 'the Nigredo'. There, the Toad spews out its poisons (Shakespeare's Richard III is repeated called a 'foul toad'). The dove of Divine spirit (the Gold) repeatedly flies from the flask and is returned for further purification, until 'the Chemical Marriage' of purified, balanced, Male and Female essences is achieved – as in the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand, which in the masque in The Tempest gets Divine blessing. This alchemical marriage heralds a new and purer beginning, just as is foretold at the end of many of Shakespeare's plays.

In alchemy, the interaction of Body and Spirit (represented by Sulphur and Mercury) is essential in the repeated purifying process of dissolution and reformation, but there is also an essential secret ingredient, without which the 'Gold' cannot be achieved. In laboratory alchemy it is sometimes called 'Red Mercury' (Wikipedia offers a modern interpretation of Red Mercury). In spiritual alchemy the secret ingredient is Pure Unconditional Love.

A doctrine of Love, however, is easily open to misinterpretation, as Hughes showed in the ministrations of the changeling Reverend Lumb in Gaudete. And in our world, as Shakespeare vividly shows in his plays, love is distorted by religion, culture, power, lust and jealousy. It is this aspect of the plays, and the 'developing sequence' of Shakespeare's alchemical ritual, that shapes Hughes' poem, 'An Alchemy'.

For Hughes and, as he believed, for Shakespeare, the active alchemical agent,

representing both Mercury and Sulphur in various forms, was the Goddess – Nature – with her universal creative and destructive powers. Especially, as she works within us through our emotions, ambitions, pretensions, deviance, failings, empathy and love. In Shakespeare's work, Hughes believed she was present in all her forms – Sacred Bride (Venus/Diana/Aphrodite), Divine Mother (Juno/Hera), and Hag (Hecate/Queen of Hell). And she is present in the many elemental and psychological tempests of Shakespeare's plays.

In the early part of Hughes' poem, he uses the vitriolic nature of Tamora from Titus Andronicus (Salt Tamora – the Goddess as Queen of Hell) to break down characters who distort and abuse Love. The Moor / Aaron, rapacious Tarquin, Puritan Icicle Angelo, power-hungry Richard III, and justice-and-ducat loving, Shylock, for example. And he ends that section with the release of a mourning dove – the dove of the Love Goddess Aphrodite.

Flittering dove

A detailed discussion of the first part of 'An Alchemy' is published on the 'Online First' webpages of Intellect Discover Book 2.0 at

https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/btwo_00087_1

This early part of the poem constitutes the first stage of Hughes' alchemical work, but since Aphrodite's dove can only 'flitter', 'mourning' from the Base Matter in the alchemical flask, and is not a bird in firm and steady flight, the alchemical process of purification must continue.

The next alchemical steps take place in the lines from Ancestral her sourcery to Who came again. These eleven lines are steeped in references to sorcery and herbal lore. They refer to the characters and plays in which, as Hughes outlines in Shakespeare and the Goddess... , the Goddess, in her triple aspects, is very clearly the active alchemical agent of change.

Our 'Ancestral' sorcerer and healer is the Goddess, Nature, and it is her herbal remedies that 'Helena the Healer', in All's Well that Ends Well has inherited from her father and uses to cure the King³.

Helena, who loves Bertram, regardless of his rejection of her and his lustful pursuits⁴, worships at the altar of 'Diana'⁵. She discusses chastity often in the play, and chastity, Hughes wrote later, 'signifies the dedicated spiritual aspect of 'total unconditional love'' (SGCB 218). It is Bertram's impure Spirit which must be alchemically purged, just as must that of 'Angelo' in Measure for Measure, who rejects Mariana's unconditional love and flouts his own Puritanical laws. AndrogyneBoth are tricked, by their own lust and by the subterfuges of the women, who represent 'Diana, her owl side', into sleeping, under cover of darkness, with the constant, loving woman each had rejected and, thereby, uniting, Male and Female essences to create the alchemical androgyne, which represents 'spiritual (winged) potentiality'⁶.

It is the Goddess who provides the link, in Hughes' poem, between Angelo, 'Ophelia' and 'Othello', and it is 'Hamlet' and Othello on whom Hughes believed she works as the Queen of Hell.

Hamlet and Othello differ from Angelo in that both love the woman they reject. Hamlet's love for Ophelia and Othello's love for Desdemona is, as Hughes wrote in Shakespeare and the Goddess... 'unconditional love'(SGCB 216, 228). Yet both are led to believe that a woman's love cannot be trusted.

The Ghost, with the information that Hamlet's mother has married his father's murderer (and Brother), presents his son with the double vision – the loved and the loathed woman within the one body of the mother.... Hamlet cannot separate Ophelia from his mother. He accuses her of possessing the same treacherous nature by virtue of being female.(SGCB 133–4).

Othello loves Desdemona and she him [but] Iago ... the emissary of Hell, pours his sexual cynicism into Othello's as-if-sleeping ear... with the sibylline handkerchief, Iago makes the double vision seem real... ..Othello rises mad with his purpose to kill Desdemona.(SGCB 228).

Both the Ghost and Iago are, in Hughes' analysis, cold, manipulative emissaries of the Queen of Hell.

However, it was not Angelo who 'walled up' Ophelia, as Hughes' linked lines might suggest. Ophelia is not 'walled up' in a nunnery, as Hamlet tells her to be; or by her brother's urging that she be wary of Hamlet's professions of love; and not by her father, who charges her to have nothing more to do with Hamlet; but metaphorically, she is 'walled up' by Nature from her distress over Hamlet's cruel rejection of her and from her grief for her father's death. As Laertes says,

Nature is fine in love; and where t'is fine
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves. (Hamlet IV v 155–7)

After Polonius's hurried burial, Ophelia appears 'fantastically drest with Straws and Flowers'⁷. She sings of Hecate's world of death and the grave. And the flowers she gathers are Nature's medicinal herbs.

Even the unlearned among Shakespeare's audiences would have been familiar with herbal medicine and would have known the common folk-names and usages of at least some of Ophelia's flowers. Ophelia describes some of these: Rosemary 'that's for remembrance'; Rue, for regret, 'we may call it herb-grace o'Sundays'; and pansies (Heartsease) 'that's for thoughts' (IV v 68–77). Some of her flowers are specifically associated with the Goddess and with love: pansies and columbine (Granny's bonnet) are both sacred to Venus. Daisies (Bruiswort) were used by girls in the divinatory, petal-counting of 'He loves me: He loves me not' and were common in Mayday garlands. Fragile violets, like pansies, were used in love-spells and for healing; and Giant Fennel once made the thyrsus – the wands of the Dionysian bacchants. All these

plants were, and still are, used in herbal medicine. Even nettles (Devil's claw) have long been used to help rheumatic pain (if you roll in them)⁸.

Willow, the branch of which broke and tipped Ophelia into the 'weeping brook', is Hecate's tree of enchantment, sorcery and witchcraft⁹. In the water, 'she chanted snatches of old tunes' and, as Gertrude says, lay 'like a creature native and indu'd / unto that element' before merging with water and earth in 'muddy death'. (IV vii 180–6). A fine alchemical 'dissolution' into the four elements: air (Ophelia's singing), fire (Hecate's witchy tree), earth and water.

'Willow Willow' is not one of Ophelia's songs. It is sung by Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello*, *The Moor of Venice*. And it was the Goddess, like the mourning dove earlier in Hughes' poem, who 'wept' for the death of these innocent women, and for the impurities of Love and Spirit which cause their deaths. In Shakespeare and the Goddess..., Hughes writes of the 'special pathos' of Ophelia's helplessness, which 'is inseparable from the cut and wilting flowers'; and he sees her role as being to 'register the human cost, the metaphysical cost to the soul (to the hero's own soul)' of rejecting Love (SGCB 239).

The same could be said of Desdemona's plight. She calls her willow song 'an old thing' sung by a forsaken maid, 'but it expresses her fortune / And she died singing it' (IV iii 28–9). So, too, does it express Desdemona's misfortune.

Othello is a hero who has, indeed 'lopped his rivals' both in war and in love, but The Queen of Hell reveals his imperfections. His military skills link him to 'Fortinbras', the son of the king of Norway who was killed by Hamlet's father in the battle for Denmark. Young Fortinbras (whose name means 'strong-arm') has not 'lopped his rivals' but he is soldier – a man carrying a sword and 'steeled' for battle – and a man who will, as Hamlet says (perhaps ironically) 'find quarrel in a straw / when honour is at stake' (IV iv 51–3). In Hamlet, he completes Nature's uroboric circle of death and rebirth by taking back the Kingdom of Denmark which was originally taken from his father:

For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune
I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me. (V ii 375–7)
Steel, however, is an amalgam of iron and carbon which also contains traces of other elements. It is not a pure metal – not alchemical 'Gold' – so, alchemically, it must still be tested and purified.

In Hamlet, the Goddess's herbal poisons kill many of the characters. 'Gertrude', however, throughout the play demonstrates unconditional love. She loved Hamlet's father: 'she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on' (I ii 143–5). She loves Hamlet's uncle unquestioningly until Hamlet tells her of his guilt. And she is a truly loving mother to Hamlet, even in his seeming madness. Her death is accidental and self-administered. So, as the Mother Goddess, she 'Came again' in Shakespeare's plays in different forms.

There is numerology here in these 11 lines, too: 10 (a complete cycle) + 1 (a new beginning). Nature's Uroborus eats its tail, and the alchemical process begins again.

Uroborus

For Hughes, as early as 1973, when this poem was first published, it was the Goddess, in all her forms, that he saw as the chief alchemical agent in Shakespeare's works. There, she is not just the 'Vitriol' – the dissolving 'Salt' of the first part of Hughes' poem, and the potent 'ancestral sorcerer', Nature, of the second, she is also the Androgyne which, for alchemists, embodies 'the two corresponding powers of the soul' and 'the two forces or poles of human nature (the Sulphur and Quicksilver [Mercury] of inward alchemical work)'¹⁰.

She 'came again' in the next lines of 'An Alchemy', 'rising' as the chaste 'Desdemona', the 'Sacred Bride', who, unlike her maid, Emilia, cannot believe any woman who truly loves her husband could 'abuse her husband in such gross kindv as to 'couch' with another man (IV iii 66). She is also Isabella, the (almost) 'Nun of Vienna' who, like Circe (who turned Ulysses' men into swine), uses Angelo's swinish nature to destroy him before redeeming him in his acceptance of Mariana – thus heralding the advent of the Love Goddess's 'ring-dove'.

She is also Hecate, the Moon Goddess, who in Shakespeare's plays causes the cosmic disturbances which are reflected in the madness and the mental disorders of his characters, and are spoken of frequently as omens portending chaos, such as the social upheaval and jealousy which pervade Caesar's world.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero's magic creates the tempest that brings Shakespeare's shipwrecked characters to the island where the Great Witch, Sycorax, rules. But when Sycorax's power is overcome and Miranda and Ferdinand are finally joined it becomes an island of love – 'Venus's Island'.

As 'the Blue Hag Hecate', the Goddess stirs the storm in which Macbeth first meets the three 'weird sisters'. Hughes describes them in Shakespeare and the Goddess... as representing 'the Queen of Hell in her most virulent form' (SGCB 234). Shakespeare's Hecate, 'the close contriver of all harms' (III v 6), calls Macbeth 'a wayward son / Spiteful and wrathful; who, as others do, / Loves for his own ends' (III v 11–13), and it is her witches and Macbeth's equally diabolical wife who work on the doubleness in his nature to turn him from the 'noble' 'peerless kinsman' (I iv 58) of 'Saintly Duncan' into a Tarquinian murderer.

There is doubleness throughout *Macbeth*, where 'fair is foul and foul is fair' (I 11), and it is Macbeth's recognition of his own evil nature, the knowledge of his 'false heart' and of the evil he has done, that tips him into near-madness – to seeing 'daggers of the mind' – and ultimately destroys him:

It is the bloody business informs

Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings; and wither'd murder,
Alarm'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his steady pace
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. (II i 50–6)

Alchemically, it is significant that rather than directly destroy Macbeth the Goddess deflects 'the dagger' to saintly Duncan in his 'Sanctum'. So, Macbeth's knowledge of his sins includes his own treasonous and sacrilegious murder of an anointed King. It is alchemically necessary, too, that the impure King must die and from his death a new King will be born. Macduff, who kills Macbeth, destroys the impure King, and by his death becomes the new, potentially purer King. Macduff was 'of no woman born' (V viii 36), and his caesarean birth – technically a virgin birth – links him, mythologically, to the Divine.

An early alchemical treatise translated by Janus Lacinius Theraputis the Calabrian describes the stages of the alchemical process. It includes eight allegorical images in three of which the King is killed, the killer joins him in the grave, and from their bones a new King arises, 'full of the grace of God'¹¹:

Killing the King

This is the alchemical pattern of dissolution and recreation ('dissolve and coagulate') which is present in Macbeth, as it is, too, in Richard III, Hamlet and King Lear.

Nor is it just in Shakespeare's Macbeth that the 'crown's contagion' reflects the doubleness in human nature which alchemy must address. It is there, too, in the rivalries for the crown which pervade King Lear. Hughes' references to this play end this section of the poem with mention of 'Gloucester', 'Cordelia' and 'Lear', but the linked lines 'Cordelia guiding / Blinded Gloucester' seem problematic.

In King Lear, it is not Cordelia who guides the blinded Gloucester, but first an old man, then Gloucester's banished, illegitimate son, Edgar.

Gloucester's blinding is an extreme example of the terrible results of double nature in many of the characters in King Lear. It is also a metaphor for Lear's own blindness in the way he values his sons: 'I stumbled when I saw' he tells the old man, recognising Edgar's betrayal of him. It is almost immediately after Lear meets Gloucester, recognises his voice and learns of his blindness, that, mixing 'Reason in madness', he describes himself as 'cut to the brains' (IV vi 72, 192), which in 'An Alchemy', becomes 'Cutting to the brain'.

Cordelia, as the exemplar of unconditional love, could be seen as a guide for those watching or reading King Lear; but the simple phrase, 'Cordelia guiding', belies the importance Hughes attached to Cordelia in Shakespeare's alchemy. Hughes explained

this in detail in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, the original title for which was 'The Silence of Cordelia', because, as he wrote to Keith Sagar: 'Cordelia's silence. The key to the whole complex'¹².

In that work, Hughes wrote that 'Shakespeare always presents as the natural path towards the heart's truth, that 'matter of the heart' which will finally reject words'(SGCB 278); and Cordelia fails to find words to express her love for Lear, because 'Nothing can pretend to express the truth'(SGCB 277). 'Ordinary words' he wrote 'are inherently false but can encompass the truth in their fashion'... 'glanced at crookedly, as by the Fool in King Lear'(SGCB 278).

It is the Fool who points out Lear's errors of judgment, telling him soon after his division of the crown: 'thou had'st little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden one away'(I iv 157-8). And Lear's 'under-crown lightning' – his madness – begins when both Regan and Goneril drive him away.

The most powerful dissolution in this section of 'An Alchemy', and in Shakespeare's play, is the madness of Lear, caused by his own misinterpretations of love, his rejection of Cordelia's 'unconditional love', and by his obstinacy and pride. Hughes places the blame firmly on the Goddess in her retributive form as 'The Boar', something he only explains fully in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being. It is she who alchemically dissolves and re-constitutes Lear. The storm is hers: 'The lightnings are heavenly fires and suffering of rejected Divine Love, alias the rage of the Boar'(SGCB 274); and Lear's madness – 'the charge of the Boar' – is, 'a psychological event, a shock wave of death-rebirth'(SGCB 383). Her presence as Nightmare, with her 'nine-fold' minions, is attested to in the play by Edgar in his disguise as Poor Tom where he invokes Saint Swithun to banish her¹³:

Saint Withhold footed thrice the 'old;
He met the night-mare and her nine-fold;
Bid her alight,
And her troth plight,
And, aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!
</p></p>
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<div>
<p>In Hughes' poem, it is 'The Boar's Moons' that are 'mangling' Lear's 'sainted flesh' ('sainted' because he is an anointed King). In Shakespeare's play, Gloucester refers to the evil portent of 'the late eclipses of the sun and moon'(I ii 97); references to devils and fiends abound; and it is the Goddess's poisonous herbs – 'Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow / In our sustaining corn'(IV iv 5) that Lear is seen wearing before Cordelia finally meets him again.</p>
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<div>
<p>Cordelia, for Hughes, demonstrates 'total, unconditional love', and she does, in the end, guide her father to an understanding of what Love truly is. Once they are re-united, his 'great rage' is 'kill'd in him' and he becomes like a child again and begs her forgiveness:</p>
</div>
<div>
<p>We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down</p>
</div>

And ask of thee forgiveness:

(V ii 79; V iii 10–12)

At the end of Shakespeare's play, both die and a new order is established; but in 'An Alchemy' Hughes ends this section of his poem with the single line 'Lear Furens' – Lear Raging.

Nigredo

The next eleven lines of Hughes' poem form another complete alchemically cycle, dissolving Lear's rage in an alchemical process in which he enters the Nigredo, the dissolution in Raven-like darkness.

He has 'plucked out' his 'dog-hearted daughters', 'Regan'... and 'boarish' 'Goneril'(IV iii 45; III vii 57). He has rejected the daughter he 'loved most', because she 'could not heave [her] heart into her mouth' (I i 89–90), so she who had been 'his Joy' 'vanished', until they are re-united and he recognises the truth worth of her love.

Ring dove

At this point in Shakespeare's play, she dies, but the 'warm body' in Lear's arms, in the linked lines of Hughes' poem – becomes, alchemically, the warm body of the 'Rock-dove of Aphrodite', Goddess of Love – thus completing another alchemical cycle of death and rebirth. So, yet again, the alchemical bird of the Sprit flies from the darkness. It leaves 'a feather only', but this is a symbol of hope, and also a sign that more alchemical work still needs to be done.

A single line follows, which, although isolated by the pattern in which the lines before and after it are grouped, links Aphrodite's feather – the germ of alchemical 'Gold' – first to 'Timon', then to 'Coriolanus', and then to others in the fifteen lines which follow it. In Shakespeare and the Goddess, Hughes brings together Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, Coriolanus and Antony and Cleopatra, as he does in 'An Alchemy', calling them 'the drama of a period of transitions' in which the 'Gnostic redemption of the hero and heroine together' is foreshadowed (SGCB 283).

This alchemical 'marriage' of the male and female elements (the 'King' and 'Queen') of the increasingly purified Base Matter is a necessary stage in the alchemical work.

King and Queen

For Timon, in Timon of Athens, this is not possible. There is no female heroine in the play and Timon's 'unconditional love' is for Athens and its citizens, until the treachery of those he had believed to be his friends enrages him and he abandons Athens to exist in a cave in the woods.

Hughes called Shakespeare's Timon of Athens 'a vision of the meaningless absurd appetites of despiritualized mankind'(SGCB 288). Timon, whose 'need for social love of his friends' induced him to lavish his gold (his money and, metaphorically, his Soul) on them, has no 'spiritual passion' – nothing the alchemical art can work on. His reliance on nature to support him in his cave does not redeem him, instead, he gives the gold he

finds there to General Alcibides to make war on Athens and its people, with the words 'There's more gold: – / Do you damn others and let it damn you / And ditches grave you all'(IV iii 65). So, Aphrodite's feather, like Timon himself (as the linkage of lines in 'An Alchemy' suggests), is 'damned with gold'.

However, Shakespeare ends his play with recognition not only of Timon's 'soul bereft' 'latter spirits' but also with a note of hope. Timon's death, 'entomb'd upon the very hem of the sea' returns him, alchemically, to the mother waters of the alembic; and there is hope, too, in Alcibides' change-of-heart and his vow to 'Make war breed peace; make peace stint war, make each /Prescribe to other, as each other's leech'(V iv 80–1).

Coriolanus, like Timon, focuses his love on a city (Rome) and its people until they reject him. He, too, turns violently against his former love but, as Hughes wrote in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* : 'Coriolanus's Rome contains the essential nucleus that Timon's Athens lacked: the female embodiment of the hero's soul and love': his wife, Virgilia, and his mother, Volumnia(SGCB 293). These women embody the female essence of alchemy and represent 'unconditional love'. It is their love which stems Coriolanus's rage and rouses enough love in him to turn him from his intended destruction of Rome. So, love brings a meeting between the female and male parts of Coriolanus' own nature, and, although he dies, the germ of alchemical 'Gold' that 'carried Coriolanus' to this condition remains.

The next fourteen lines of this poem are difficult to interpret. Much later, when Hughes wrote his 'Introduction' to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he was aware that, 'for anyone who does not know the plays rather well... the whirl of names will sound like a betting shop in a basement of the Tower of Babel'(SGCB 35). There is a similar danger in 'An Alchemy', and, without recourse to the close examination of the plays that Hughes offered in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, it is hard to make sense of some of the lines in this poem. Hughes' focus in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* was on the themes of the Tragic Equation and The Rival Brothers, which he saw as a developing pattern in Shakespeare's work. He also believed that Shakespeare's ultimate goal was to create balance and harmony in his characters and, through the 'idea of drama as a ritual for manipulating the soul'(SGCB 33), in his audience. This, too, is Hughes' goal in 'An Alchemy'.

Peacocks Tail

In this section of the poem, now that the cyclical repetition of 'dissolve and coagulate' is almost complete, Hughes brings together the feathers of hope that will form the alchemical Peacock's Tail, the colours of which are 'an emblem of the Great Work'¹⁴ signalling the near-achievement of the pure spiritual 'Gold'.

And it is Aphrodite/Venus, Goddess of Love, who governs the alchemical stage in which the Peacock's Tail appears. In the richly illustrated 16th Century alchemical treatise, *Splendor Solis*¹⁵, she rides in a golden chariot drawn by two doves, above the alchemical flask where the Peacock spreads its magnificent tail, and the flask is surrounded by loving couples in a verdant landscape¹⁶.

In the linked lines of Hughes' poem, he now collects a feather of 'gold' which has been 'crushed from Caesar'. Julius Caesar is not one of the plays Hughes deals with in Shakespeare and the Goddess..., but in that play Caesar's nature seems fairly balanced: his love for his wife is clear, so too is his care for the Republic and for the people of Rome. Unlike Timon and Coriolanus he does not reject one for the other. He is killed by the conspirators, but his spirit remains intact. Before his assassination, Brutus urged care:

O! that we could come by Caesar's spirit,
And not dismember Caesar!
Let's be sacrificers but not butchers...
(II i 166–70)
And after the deed was done:

O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet!
Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords
In our own proper entrails.
(V iii 94–6)
So, the 'Gold' of Caesar's spirit, freed from bodily impurities, can be added to the Peacock's plumes.

Another feather is gathered from Antony and Cleopatra. Cleopatra is the 'Old Nile Serpent'. Longing for Antony when he is away in Rome, she imagines him missing her: 'He's speaking now, / Or murmuring, 'Where's my serpent of the Nile' / For so he calls me.' (I v 30). And she presents herself as the goddess, Isis, who is the tutelary god of her Egyptian realm, frequently called on by Shakespeare's characters throughout the play. In Shakespeare and the Goddess... Hughes describes Cleopatra as 'the avatar of Isis, as she presents herself and is understood to be' (SGCB 315) (cf. III vi 20–3). In all her 'infinite variety' (II ii 277), she incorporates all aspects of 'Moon-browed Isis / Bride and Mother' – and also, in the eyes of the Romans, she is Queen of Hell – 'Salt Cleopatra' (II i 26), a gypsy and a witch.

For Hughes, Antony and Cleopatra marked an important step in Shakespeare's work. In it, Antony and Cleopatra 'exist in a divine world in which the Goddess and her consort are united' (SGCB 301). Shakespeare 'painfully destroys the Puritan ego' which is Antony's rational Roman character, 'and unites both hero and Female on the transcendental plane of Divine Love' (SGCB 299). Antony 'renounces his claim to any part of the tragic world of the Roman power struggles' (SGCB 308), and he accepts 'all the failings (betrayals etc.) of the human Cleopatra... loves her, in spite of everything, with 'total unconditional love'' (SGCB 314).

Regardless of this union of Male and Female essences in the love of Antony and Cleopatra, there is no harmony in their world, nor can they achieve that. So, the alchemical process is still incomplete and, although a feather of hope may have been gathered, Antony and Cleopatra die. Thus, their essences are returned to the

alchemical 'egg' to become, again, for Hughes and (as he believed) for Shakespeare, just one more step towards the final achievement of the alchemical 'Gold'.

The next line of 'An Alchemy' is difficult to interpret. Neither Antony nor Cleopatra were 'Mourning a Rome'. Antony had given up his Roman self in his love of Cleopatra. He dies honourably, by suicide, 'a Roman, by a Roman / Valiantly Vanquished' (IV xv 60), but his concern even as he dies is for Cleopatra, not for Rome. Cleopatra, who is grief stricken, mourns Antony as 'Noblest of men', 'Husband'¹⁷, but she does not mourn 'a Rome'.

So, is it Isis / Aphrodite who is 'Mourning a Rome'? Both are linked to this phrase by the unpunctuated lines of the poem and, alchemically, this would make sense. Julius Caesar's Roman Republic died after his death. War and chaos ensued, as is clear in Antony and Cleopatra, and the chance of a Rome of balance and harmony was lost.

In the next line of Hughes' poem, 'Leontes banished' may refer to Leontes in A Winter's Tale, where harmony is restored at the end of the play, but it is Leontes Posthumus in Cymbeline who is banished 'to Italy (i.e. back to Rome)' (SGCB 336) after marrying the British king's daughter, Imogen, without the king's consent.

In Cymbeline, Hughes saw reflections of the religious dissociation of England from Catholic Rome which was still the cause of persecution and death in Shakespeare's world¹⁸. He suggested that Shakespeare's reuniting of Imogen and Leontes Posthumus, 'beyond their hope, and, as if beyond death', represents the re-establishment of balance and harmony – a new reign of the 'understanding of the heart' (SGCB 339), and a new version, for Shakespeare, of the expression of Aphrodite's total and unconditional love. In this play, too, Hughes suggested that 'the drama can be read as the alchemical transformation of a single soul' – a 'purgation and remaking' – which 'can be read as the sin and redemption of Posthumus' (SGCB 340).

The sudden reappearance of Lear in the poem as 'Lear redivivus', harks back to Lear's rebirth and transformation when he rises phoenix-like from the tempests (literal and psychological) and is reunited with Cordelia, at which point, as Hughes wrote in Shakespeare and the Goddess..., Shakespeare showed Lear's 'true self reborn – reunited with his beloved who is also reborn' (SGCB 323). So, Lear and Posthumus, both re-made and reborn, add to the feathers in the alchemical Peacock's Tail.

For Hughes, the full display of the Peacock's Tail culminated in Pericles, Prince of Tyre, when Aphrodite literally 'found breath in Marina'.

The virtuous Pericles, believing his chaste wife Thaisa to have died in childbirth while they are on his ship bound for Tyre, is forced by superstitious sailors to cast her body overboard in a chest. Thaisa is found and revived by the skills of Cerimon, a Lord of Ephesus, and enters the temple of Diana there as a votaress. Pericles leaves his new-born daughter, Marina, in the care of Cleon, Governor of Tharsus, but Cleon's wife becomes jealous of her and arranges for her to be murdered. To avoid suspicion, Cleon

and his wife arrange for a statue of Marina to be erected mourning her death and claiming that she had 'wither'd in her spring of year'(IV iv 36). Marina, however, survives the attempted murder but is capture by pirates who sell her to a brothel, where, much to the dismay of the brothel owners, her prayers to Diana help her not only to retain her virginity but also to find the words to persuade brothel customers to abandon their dishonourable ways.

Marina, who has retained her strength and purity, and whose 'breath' is used in the art of persuasion, has prevailed over seemingly impossible odds. She is ultimately reunited with Pericles and Thaisa, both of whom have demonstrated their own pure souls in the play. Unlike other plays, all remain alive, and Pericles, for Hughes was one of the plays in which 'the denouement is idealized, transcendent and lift into a music that does seem unearthly'(SGCB 331).

'Redeemed', in the next line of the poem, is a carefully chosen word. Its meaning encompasses the worldly and the spiritual. Marina redeemed the brothel customers by turning them away from sin. Aphrodite redeemed the fragments of pure love that existed in the souls of those chosen by Shakespeare as characters in his plays, where, as Hughes believed, Shakespeare changed and re-made (brought redemption to) his audience through the rituals of his drama. The alchemist redeems all these fragments in the process of creating the Peacock's Tail; and the alchemical Peacock spreads its valuable tail-feathers to make a spectacular display before discarding them into the flask to precipitate the final redemption of the alchemical process.

George Ripley, in his 15th century alchemical scroll, identified the Peacock as 'The Bird of Hermes' and showed it shedding its feathers, a process he described as 'eating' them, in order to unite White (Queen/ Female essence) and Red (King/Male essence) and create the Philosophers' Stone (the 'Gold') of spiritual rebirth¹⁹:

The Bird of Hermes is my name
Eating my wings to make me tame.

In the Sea withouten leese
Standeth the Bird of Hermes:
Eating his Wings variable,
And thereby maketh himself more stable;
When all his Fethers be agon,
He standeth still there as a stone;
Here is now both White and Red,
And also the Stone to quicken the dead.

Hughes' line 'Redeemed all Tempests', however, requires the elucidation of the meaning of Shakespeare's tempests that he provided in Shakespeare and the Goddess... . There, he discussed 'the storm' as 'evolved through the action' of Shakespeare's plays (SGCB 382), and having not just a dramatic function but being also a worldly reflection of the Goddess's anger and (as in King Lear) a physical manifestation of the psychological 'shock-wave of death-rebirth'(SGCB 383).

Marina not only adds the final plume to the Peacock's Tail, she also draws together, through the unpunctuated lines of Hughes' poem, the feathers of 'Gold' Shakespeare found in the souls of Timon, Coriolanus, Caesar, Antony, Cleopatra, Lear, Leontes, and Posthumus. The spiritual/psychological deaths and rebirths of these characters redeem all tempests – assuaging the Goddess's anger and healing each one who has redeemed his or her soul.

The storm in Shakespeare's final play, *The Tempest*, is different. It is summoned by the magician, Prospero, who controls all four elements – Air (Ariel), Earth (Caliban), Fire and Water (the lightning, thunder and rain of the storm). Before dealing with *The Tempest*, however, Hughes, in 'An Alchemy', brought together the Phoenix and the Turtle, the two creatures which in Shakespeare's poem of that title represent pure, unconditional love²⁰.

Shakespeare's poem was first published in 1601 among other 'Diverse poeticall essaies on the former subject; viz: the Turtle and Phoenix. Done by the best and chiefest of our modern writers', which supplemented Robert Chester's 'Loves Martyr, or, Rosalins Complaint. Allegorically shadowing the truth of Love'²¹. Shakespeare's poem is an 'anthem' for the death of these two creatures which, in Chester's poem, are united in a pure Platonic love and die together so that the Phoenix may be reborn. As Shakespeare described them:

So they loved, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one;
Two distincts, Division none;
Number there in love was slaine.

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;
Distance, and no space was seene
Twixt this Turtle and his Queene
But in them it were a wonder.
(lines 25–32)

Perhaps it was the Phoenix as the Bird of Hermes to which Hughes referred when he wrote that 'His Kiss of Life / Stirred the Turtle'; or it could have been Shakespeare himself, whose alchemy Hughes was tracing here.

In any case, Hughes changed the gender of each of these lovers. His Phoenix, in 'An Alchemy', becomes male, like that of George Ripley, and his turtle (which is a male turtle–dove in Chester's poem and in Shakespeare's) becomes Aphrodite's turtle–dove, which first shed its feather into this section of his poem. Aphrodite is the moon goddess whose powers control the cycles of menstruation. In 'An Alchemy', her dove now becomes the 'Turtle / Of the waters of amnios' – immersed in the amniotic fluid that surrounds the developing foetus in 'The lunar cauldron' of the alembic womb.

The next five lines of 'An Alchemy' remove the Queen of Hell in her darkest forms from

'the Tree': 'black Venus / double tongued' in her power to inspire love and to destroy her lovers, as in Venus and Adonis; the 'swine uddered', 'foul witch' 'Sycorax'²², who is mother of Caliban in *The Tempest*; and 'Lilith the night-crow', the Hebrew owl-goddess, banished first wife of Adam, seducer of men and stealer of children, who is also the screech-owl – 'The shrieking harbinger / Foul precursor of the fiend'(5–6) who is banned from the mourning ceremony in Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle*.

All these 'Slid from the Tree' which, in alchemy, is 'The Tree of Diana'(Aphrodite), the 'Philosopher's Tree', a pure, moon-white, crystalline growth which fills the flask and signals the near completion of the alchemist's Great Work.

Next, in another reference to *The Tempest*, 'the Rainbow / Breasted dove' is released with 'a leaf of light', and linked to Prospero's virginal daughter, Miranda, who falls instantly in love with Ferdinand, the first man she has ever seen who is not her father or the monstrous Caliban. At first, she thinks Ferdinand is 'a spirit'(I ii 488), which seems like 'a thing divine'(I ii 498), or, in Hughes's words, an 'Adam / Adonis'; and Ferdinand thinks she is 'most sure the goddess / On whom these airs attend' (I ii 505). The 'miracle', may be intended to refer to Miranda's meeting with Ferdinand or to the appearance of the benign, Heavenly goddesses who are summoned by Prospero in Shakespeare's *Masque*: or to both. Hughes, in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, wrote of the reaction of the young couple as mutual 'love at first sight' which 'becomes mutual adoration and promise of eternal love'(SGCB 437); and he described their first words to each other as 'exchanges taking place on the transcendental plane'(SGCB 415). He called the *Masque*, which unites the Heavenly and the Earth-bound, an 'alchemical vision'(SGCB 444), 'The sacred nuptial ceremony'(SGCB 441), and 'an incantatory magic spell, a Hermetic ritual in the active mode'(SGCB 442).

The *Masque* in *The Tempest* brings together Juno, 'the queen o' th' sky' (whose 'peacock's fly amain' as she approaches); Iris, who calls herself Juno's 'watery arch and messenger'; and 'rich Ceres', 'Bounteous lady' Earth-Mother and goddess of fertility. Juno bids them join her to

Bless this twain, that they may prosperous be
And honoured in their issue
(IV i 57–72).

In 'An Alchemy' Hughes placed Iris's rainbow on the breast of one of Venus/Aphrodite's doves, which, in the *Masque*, Juno describes as drawing Venus's chariot across the sky after he son, Cupid, has worked 'some wanton charm upon this man and maid'(IV i 101).

Hughes' alchemy, here, was different to that of Shakespeare but for both the blessing of the chaste union of Miranda and Ferdinand by the gods was necessary for the creation of the new, harmonious world which Prospero sought to create. The chastity, too, which Prospero imposed on them until they all return to Naples and 'see the nuptial \ Of these dear-beloved solemnized'(V 367), ensures that the alchemical 'Gold' of their union is free from bodily impurities.

Dianas Tree

A woodcut from the alchemical text *Uraltes Chymische Werke*, attributed to Abraham Eliazar, 1735, illustrates the union which Hughes and Shakespeare describe. A double Uroborus forming a completed circle in front of Diana's Tree is titled, 'Unite Them', and shows the union of the Universal Divine Spirit (the winged snake), with the Earth-bound prima materia (humankind)²³.

In *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, Hughes wrote that *The Tempest* 'gives the impression of being the final product of a long alchemical labour' (SGCB 447)²⁴. He went on to develop a complex (and questionable) myth-based explanation for the rebirth which traditionally follows the creation of the 'Gold' (the 'Philosopher's Stone') that he believed happened with 'the alchemical marriage' (SGCB 451) of Miranda and Ferdinand. Shakespeare, however, allows Prospero to postpone the actual marriage until after the play has ended and all but he have returned to Naples. Before this occurs, Prospero will 'abjure' the 'rough magic' he has been performing; chase away 'the ignorant fumes that mantle' the 'pure reason' of those who had plotted to kill him; pardon all who had conspired against him, including Caliban; and free Ariel. Then, he vows,

I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the Earth,
And deeper than ever did plummet sound
I'll drown my book.v (V i 60–6).

In 'An Alchemy', Hughes, too, avoids the rebirth. Instead, in lines that step down the page, to mimic the action he describes, he returns everything to the alchemical 'crucible' of 'Tiamat', the most ancient scaly monster of the waters of Chaos from whom, in Babylonian myth, our world was created:

The Mother

The Scales

The Coil

Of the Matter

And he sinks it 'With Prospero's bones / And the sounding Book', into her fathomless deeps.

Prospero, in his final speeches, anticipates his own death, having given up his magic:

'What strength I have's my own / Which is most faint'
(V 3–4).

'I will retire me to my Milan,
Where every third thought shall be my grave'

(V 68–9.)

Borrowing the nautical imagery of depth–sounding, used so precisely by Shakespeare in Prospero’s speech, Hughes’ final lines suggest that Shakespeare, as that ‘the supreme alchemist Prospero/, Shakespeare’(SGCB 431), shares this ending, and that the ‘sounding Book’ may well be Shakespeare’s own works, in which he plumbed the depths of alchemy.

Hughes’ poem, ‘An Alchemy’, is a remarkable work but its complexities make it impossible to understand unless the reader has as broad an understanding of Shakespeare’s works as Hughes did. Nor does it comply with what Hughes called the simple, direct, honest speech, which he later admired in the *vacanas* of the Siva–worshipping mystics of Southern India²⁵. Rather, it is as he described Shakespeare’s language to Ekbert Faas– ‘full of knotted up complexities and piled up obscurities’ which are, in fact, ‘utterly direct and utterly simple’ that by ‘hitting one nail on the head it makes fifty others jump in of their own accord’²⁶.

For Hughes and Shakespeare, and for alchemists like George Ripley, Abraham Eliazar and others how wrote and sometimes illustrated their alchemical texts, their alchemy was performed through the ritual manipulation of words, images, symbols and, above all, poetry. But alchemical texts, full as they usually are of paradoxes, riddles and allegories, are notoriously difficult to interpret and are often described as a labyrinth.

16th century alchemist, doctor and philosopher, Paracelsus, seemed to suggest the difficulties when he subtitled his *Coelum Philosophorum* (The Book of Vexations), although he may have been referring to the chemical disturbances brought to the *prima materia* in an alchemist’s laboratory. Artephius, a 12th century philosopher puts the warning more clearly²⁷:

He that takes the words of the hermetic philosophers literally, he even already, having lost the thread of Ariadne, wanders in the midst of the labyrinth, multiplies errors, and casts away his money for naught.

Hughes’ poem, ‘An Alchemy’, fits well into this labyrinthine pattern but it is not an alchemical text outlining a method of obtaining gold. Instead it charts the alchemy process he discerned in of Shakespeare’s work, and, at the same time, it embodies Hughe’ own poetic ritual of alchemical transmutation.

Addendum: Shakespeare, Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism and Alchemy.

In his ‘Introduction’ in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes wrote of ‘the pervasive influence’ of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism on ‘the intellectual life of England’ at the time when Shakespeare was creating his poetry and plays, and he ‘picked out’ what he believed to be ‘the salient features of the movement as it which came within the orbit of Shakespeare’s known social and political world.’ and as it ‘can be seen to relate to his imaginative life’(SGCB 18–19).

To do this, he relied strongly on the work of Dame Frances Yates, who, in her book, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, wrote that 'the occult philosophy of the Elizabethan age was no minor concern of a few adepts. It was the main philosophy of the age, stemming from John Dee and his movement'²⁸.

Yates traced the development of Occult Neoplatonism and Christian Cabbala from its origins to the high point of its influence in Renaissance Italy, and from there to its influence in Elizabethan and Jamesian England, where it initially flourished but later became associated in the popular mind with dark magic, trickery, witches and ghosts.

Fundamental to the transmission of this learning from Italy to England, were Giordano Bruno, John Dee and the eldest son of the Earl of Pembroke, Sir Philip Sidney.

Bruno, was an Italian Dominican Friar whose poetic re-interpretation of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism and Hebrew Cabbala in Christian terms taught that we and the world are a reflection of the Divine, as in the Hermetic principle 'As above So below'. Since, 'All is One', we are able, by the use of memory techniques and imagination, to cleanse our souls and rise from the darkness of the world to the Divine Source. In 1583, whilst in England, Bruno presented three notoriously badly received lectures to doctors of philosophy at Oxford University, which focussed on Copernican theory in the context of the astral magic of the Neoplatonic Hermeticist, Marsilio Ficino²⁹. He published a number of books based on hermetic philosophy and morality, including the series of mystical love poems, *De gli Eroici Furori* (On the Heroic Frenzies), which he dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney, with whom he had become close. This dedication includes extensive notes about the furor of passionate love, and the power of Mystical Love to make the soul divine and heroic.

Sidney's own closely argued essay, 'In Defence of Poesie', links true poetry (that made by Poets (not 'versifiers that neede never aunswere to the name of Poets'³⁰) to Platonic 'divine frenzy', and 'Planet-like Music'³¹. Poetry, he wrote, through the alchemy of inspiration, memory and imagination can 'hold children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And pretending no more, doth intende the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue'³². He and his circle of friends which included the poets Gabriel Harvey, Edward Dyer and Edmund Spencer, were studying the works of John Dee, and they had dedicated themselves to the reformation of English poetry³³. They called their group, 'The Areopagus', after the aristocratic Athenian council in Ancient Greece³⁴.

It is believed, and it is very likely, that Bruno also met Dr John Dee, who was Sidney's tutor and patron. Dee was a brilliant and learned mathematician and astronomer who became astrologer-in-chief to Queen Elizabeth I³⁵. He was also a practicing cabbalist and, through his 'medium', Edmund Kelly, he consulted angelic guides who dictated to him the work which he published as *Monas Heiroglyphica*. This highly symbolic and difficult text would, he claimed, revealed the secret mysteries of nature and would revolutionise current knowledge.

Sidney's younger sister, Mary, Countess of Pembroke, was also very influential. She was a respected poet, and, as John Aubrey wrote of her – 'She was the greatest patronesse of witt and learning of any lady in her time. She was a great chymist and spent yearly a great deale in that study. She kept for her laborator in the house Adrian Gilbert (vulgarly called Dr. Gilbert), halfe brother to Sir Walter Raleigh, who was a great chymist in those dayes'³⁶. Most importantly, she founded a literary group known as 'The Wilton Circle' which met regularly at her home, Wilton House. A number of prominent poets benefited from meetings with this group and from her patronage, including Edmund Spenser (who dedicated his poem, 'The Ruins of Time' to her and addressed a sonnet to her which he prefixed to *The Faerie Queen*), Gabriel Harvey, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, John Aubrey and Ben Jonson. Through these poets, and particularly through the work of Spenser and Jonson, the philosophies of Neoplatonism and the art and magic of Alchemy became widely known, not just among the literati but to the English people in general.

Spencer's Hymnes, which 'abound in references to Plato and to Platonic philosophy'³⁷, express the Platonic and Cabbalistic importance of transformative Love. This and the Platonic and Cabbalistic ideas which fostered creativity in the Italian Renaissance – ideas of universal harmony and the Hermetic/alchemical transmission of divine emanations to our world through planetary influence – is fundamental in his poem, *The Faerie Queen*, which was widely read in England. Alchemy, as an alleged means of transforming lead into gold in a laboratory, was familiar to most people, and Christopher Marlow drew on it in this debased form to create *Doctor Faustus*. Ben Jonson also made fun of it in his popular play, *The Alchemist*.

The spiritual purpose of Alchemy, which like that of Christian Cabbala works to purify and transform the Spirit of human individuals, was less widely known but was very familiar to the poets of the Areopagus and the Wilton Circle. Sir Henry Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, was the husband of Mary Sidney. He shared Mary's interest in the arts, and in 1591 he became the patron of a group of actors and playwrights known as 'The Earl Of Pembroke's Men'. Between 1591 and 1593, William Shakespeare was a member of this group and among the plays performed by them were several of his works. When the London theatres closed due to plague, Pembroke's Men toured the country, but, as Peter Ackroyd notes: '[they] were not simply a group of travelling players. They were invited to perform before the queen during the Christmas season, a signal honour for a group so recently established'³⁸.

In London's relatively small circle of aristocratic patrons, intellectuals, poets, playwrights and actors, William Shakespeare, as Stephen Greenblatt and Peter Ackroyd have both shown in their biographies, knew, lived, and often worked closely alongside many of these men. He was also, as Frances Yates has shown, and as Ted Hughes attests in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, very familiar with the theory and practice of all the occult arts.

Yates wrote that 'Though Shakespeare never wielded a wand, nor thought of himself as a magus, he is a magician, master of the spell-binding use of words and poetry as

magic. This was an art in which he was supreme'39.

Shakespeare's wand was his pen, and Hughes and many other writers have divined occult purpose in his poems and plays. For Hughes, Shakespeare's whole opus had an overall alchemical and cabbalistic pattern, and in his own poem, 'An Alchemy', he created an alchemical text which he structured to demonstrate this.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The name of Helena's father, Gerard de Narbon, would have reminded many in Shakespeare's audience of the popular Herbal published in 1597 by John Gerard.
2. 'I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live / Into your guidance' (III 99–101).
3. 'Now Dian, from thy altar do I fly / And to imperial Love, that god most high / Do my sighs stream' (III 71–3).
4. Jung, C.G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Princeton University Press, 1952, p. 202.
5. This stage direction occurs in the 1790 Nicholas Rowe edition. Rowe depended on the 4th Folio (1685) but, being an actor, he added some helpful stage directions.
6. There is much scholarly debate about the identity of the 'long purples, / That liberal shepherds give a grosser name / But our cold maids do dead man's fingers call them'.(IV vii 193–5). The most likely plant is *Orchis mascula*, an early flowering common orchid with long spikes of purple flowers, sometimes called 'Dog's bollocks' or 'Fool's bollocks', because of the shape of the buds. Its root is two testicle-sized white tubers with fine white rootlets, and it has long been used as a medicine for fertility and for sexual disorders.
(<http://www.sussexflora.org.uk/2020/04/orchis-mascula-early-purple-orchid>).
7. Circe had a riverside cemetery planted with willows and dedicated to Hecate. Willow trees frequently overhang water—courses and are commonly called 'weeping willows'. The medicinal ingredient in the bark of the tree, acetylsalicylic acid, is the active ingredient in the anti-inflammatory pain-killer, Aspirin.
8. Burckhardt, T. *Alchemy*, Alement Books, 1987. pp. 149–51.
9. The full version of *A Form and Method of Perfecting Bases Metals* by Janus Lacinius Therapus the Calabrian, which is thought to be a copy of an originally treatise by 14th century alchemist Petrus Bonus, can be found of the Alchemy Website at https://www.alchemywebsite.com/petrus_bonus.html.
10. Sagar, K. (ed.) *The Letters of Ted Hughes & Keith Sagar*, The British Library, 2102, pp.10, 181, 212.

11. Saint Withhol is Saint Swithin, an Anglo–Saxon saint whose association with meteorological disturbances is still part of local folk–superstitions: if it rains on Saint Swithin’s day it is said that it will continue to rain for 40 days.
12. White, A.E. (ed) *The Hermetic Museum Vol II*, ‘An Open Entrance to the Palace of the King, by an anonymous sage and lover of the truth’, 1893, p.194.
13. Splendor Solis is attributed to Salomon Trismosin (probably a pseudonym). Images from an 1582 manuscript can be seen on the British Library webpage at <https://www.bl.uk/a-history-of-magic/collection-items/splendor-solis>. A full version with larger images is available at <http://www.chymist.com/Splendor%20solis.pdf>.
14. This image is in the public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Splendor_Solis:Kupferstichkabinett Berlin.
15. Antony and Cleopatra: (IV xv 69) ; ‘Husband, I come. / Now to that name my courage prove my title’ (V ii 335).
16. In his ‘Note’ to *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, Hughes wrote of the effects of the ‘historical forces’ – the ‘national trauma’ – of the suppression of ‘the old Catholic and the new Puritan’ which he believed influenced Shakespeare’s life and his work. (pp.165–6). He expanded on this in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* (pp.74–78). Using alchemical symbolism, he wrote that ‘Since Shakespeare was born, lived and died within the crucible, his art evolved as a kind of salamander. It had time to develop the means to thrive and to deal with the conditions and forces that shaped him’(p.78).
17. Ashmole, Elias (ed.) *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 1562. ‘Verses Belonging to an Emblematic Scrowle: Supposed to be invented by Geo: Ripley’.(p.376). A digital reproduction is available on the Internet Archive website at <https://archive.org>.
18. Hughes chose, ‘The Phoenix and the Turtle’ as the final poem for *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, Faber, 1971 pp.161–163.
19. A digitised version of this book, including Shakespeare’s ‘essaie’ (pp.182–4), can be found on the Internet Archive website at <https://archive.org>.
20. The Tempest(I ii 308). In *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, Hughes wrote of Sycorax as ‘the African witch Sycorax (swine–crow)’(SGCB 471). Robert Graves, in *The White Goddess*, p.123., called her ‘Pig Raven’.
21. Skea, A. Image drawn from Eliazar, *Utrales Chymische Werke* – various sources.
22. One section of Hughes’ discussion of the play is also headed ‘The Tempest as a keyboard to the Complete Works’(SGCB 462).

23. Skea, A. Ted Hughes' Vacanas. <https://ann.skea.com/THVacanas.html>.
24. Faas, E. The Unaccommodated Universe, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980. p.203.
25. An adaptation from various sources of Artephius's Liber Secretus, including: Lapidus (Skinner), In Pursuit of Gold; Spearman, 1976 on Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>); and Roob, Alchemy and Mysticism, Taschen, 1997, p. 36, ref. Bibl. des Philosophes Chimique, Paris. Some versions end: 'he will never find the way out'.
26. Yates, F. The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, Routledge, 1999, p.191.
27. Yates, F. Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp.207–210.
- 28 Elizabeth Porges Watson (ed), Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella and other writings. Sir Philip Sidney. Dent, London, 1997. p.91.
29. Sidney, Defence of Poesie, p.199.
30. Sidney, Defence of Poesie, p.101.
31. Yates, F. Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, p.187.
32. Gabriel Harvey referred to this title in a letter to Edmund Spencer at a time when they were both part of Sidney's circle. See Yates, F. The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, Routledge, 1999. p.112.
33. Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, pp.187–8.
34. 'Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1555–1621)' in Clarke, A. (ed.), Brief Lives, Vol.1. by John Aubrey, Clarendon Press, 1898, p. 1165–6. Digital copy at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/47787>.
35. Yates, The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, p.113.
36. Ackroyd, P. Shakespeare: The Biography, Chatto & Windus, London, 2005. p.176.
37. Yates, The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, p. 190.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes, 'An Alchemy' and Shakespeare.

Ann Skea

Part of this paper was presented at the British Library Symposium on Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity on September 15th, 2023.

NOTE: Because of the limits placed on quotations by copyright laws, the reader will need a copy of the poem in front of them. Hughes' much later and far more detailed exposition of his theory in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (Faber 1991) is also frequently referred to in order to elucidate some of the puzzles of the poem. Quotations from 'An Alchemy' (THCP 279–282) are shown in bold italics.

When Ted wrote 'An Alchemy' for a Limited Edition anthology to be published by the Globe Theatre Trust, he expected that readers would recognise Shakespeare's characters and would be familiar with the plays in which they appeared.

The curious structure of his poem, however, with its staggered lines and lack of punctuation, makes strange connections between characters from different plays. In effect, Ted was creating an Alchemical matrix, which was the 'Base Matter' from which he intended to produce the Alchemical 'Gold' of his belief in the Alchemical nature of Shakespeare's works.

He saw Shakespeare's works as 'ritual, transformative drama', and when he sent a copy of his poem to Peter Redgrove in 1973, he told him that it derived from his 'note to my selection of Shakespeare's Verse – about the unity of the poetic theme'¹. Almost 20 years later, he would expound that theme in detail in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* but he had already decided, as he told Redgrove, that 'Not one scholar in a hundred knows Shakespeare well enough to guess whether I have something or haven't. Not one in a hundred of those hundreds has the nose for poetry to know what I'm distinguishing in the total Himalayas of Shakespeare's ore'².

Hughes was not interested in the worldly, laboratory-based alchemy from which modern chemistry derives. His interest was in the spiritual alchemy which began in Italy when, in 1460, Cosimo de Medici, instructed Marsilio Ficino to translate an ancient Greek document, purportedly based on the writings of an Egyptian sage known as Hermes Trismegistus. These Hermetic writings were taken up and further developed by Pico della Mirandola, and, especially, by the Franciscan friar, philosopher and poet, Giordano Bruno, who brought his teachings to England in 1583.

Spiritual alchemy, is based on the Hermetic principle 'As Above: So Below'. It seeks to break down the Base Matter of human nature in order to free it from its impurities and release the Divine Spark (the 'Gold') which is embodied in every human. It involves a continuous process of examination and reformation.

But in Bruno's time, which was also Shakespeare's time, to undertake alchemy in any form was dangerous. The changes produced by an alchemist in a laboratory seemed like magic; and the emphasis in spiritual alchemy on the ability of a human being to change their Divinely allotted place in life skirted very close to heresy, for which Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome in 1600. Alchemical texts, therefore, were written in code, using symbols, metaphor, story-telling, and, especially, poetry.

Iconic alchemical images represent progressive stages in the cyclical process of alchemical purification: The killing of the King (as in Macbeth for example) precedes the dissolution and putrefaction of the Base Matter into a black Crow-like chaos called 'the Nigredo'. There, the Toad spews out its poisons (Shakespeare's Richard III is repeated called a 'foul toad'). The dove of Divine spirit (the Gold) repeatedly flies from the flask and is returned for further purification, until 'the Chemical Marriage' of purified, balanced, Male and Female essences is achieved – as in the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand, which in the masque in The Tempest gets Divine blessing. This alchemical marriage heralds a new and purer beginning, just as is foretold at the end of many of Shakespeare's plays.

In alchemy, the interaction of Body and Spirit (represented by Sulphur and Mercury) is essential in the repeated purifying process of dissolution and reformation, but there is also an essential secret ingredient, without which the 'Gold' cannot be achieved. In laboratory alchemy it is sometimes called 'Red Mercury' (Wikipedia offers a modern interpretation of Red Mercury). In spiritual alchemy the secret ingredient is Pure Unconditional Love.

A doctrine of Love, however, is easily open to misinterpretation, as Hughes showed in the ministrations of the changeling Reverend Lumb in Gaudete. And in our world, as Shakespeare vividly shows in his plays, love is distorted by religion, culture, power, lust and jealousy. It is this aspect of the plays, and the 'developing sequence' of Shakespeare's alchemical ritual, that shapes Hughes' poem, 'An Alchemy'.

For Hughes and, as he believed, for Shakespeare, the active alchemical agent, representing both Mercury and Sulphur in various forms, was the Goddess – Nature – with her universal creative and destructive powers. Especially, as she works within us through our emotions, ambitions, pretensions, deviance, failings, empathy and love. In Shakespeare's work, Hughes believed she was present in all her forms – Sacred Bride (Venus/Diana/Aphrodite), Divine Mother (Juno/Hera), and Hag (Hecate/Queen of Hell). And she is present in the many elemental and psychological tempests of Shakespeare's plays.

In the early part of Hughes' poem, he uses the vitriolic nature of Tamora from Titus Andronicus (Salt Tamora – the Goddess as Queen of Hell) to break down characters who distort and abuse Love. The Moor / Aaron, rapacious Tarquin, Puritan Icicle Angelo, power-hungry Richard III, and justice-and-ducat loving, Shylock, for example. And he ends that section with the release of a mourning dove – the dove of the Love

Goddess Aphrodite.

Flittering dove

A detailed discussion of the first part of 'An Alchemy' is published on the 'Online First' webpages of Intellect Discover Book 2.0 at https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/btwo_00087_1

This early part of the poem constitutes the first stage of Hughes' alchemical work, but since Aphrodite's dove can only 'flitter', 'mourning' from the Base Matter in the alchemical flask, and is not a bird in firm and steady flight, the alchemical process of purification must continue.

The next alchemical steps take place in the lines from Ancestral her sourcery to Who came again. These eleven lines are steeped in references to sorcery and herbal lore. They refer to the characters and plays in which, as Hughes outlines in Shakespeare and the Goddess... , the Goddess, in her triple aspects, is very clearly the active alchemical agent of change.

Our 'Ancestral' sorcerer and healer is the Goddess, Nature, and it is her herbal remedies that 'Helena the Healer', in All's Well that Ends Well has inherited from her father and uses to cure the King³.

Helena, who loves Bertram, regardless of his rejection of her and his lustful pursuits⁴, worships at the altar of 'Diana'⁵. She discusses chastity often in the play, and chastity, Hughes wrote later, 'signifies the dedicated spiritual aspect of 'total unconditional love'' (SGCB 218). It is Bertram's impure Spirit which must be alchemically purged, just as must that of 'Angelo' in Measure for Measure, who rejects Mariana's unconditional love and flouts his own Puritanical laws. AndrogyneBoth are tricked, by their own lust and by the subterfuges of the women, who represent 'Diana, her owl side', into sleeping, under cover of darkness, with the constant, loving woman each had rejected and, thereby, uniting, Male and Female essences to create the alchemical androgyne, which represents 'spiritual (winged) potentiality'⁶.

It is the Goddess who provides the link, in Hughes' poem, between Angelo, 'Ophelia' and 'Othello', and it is 'Hamlet' and Othello on whom Hughes believed she works as the Queen of Hell.

Hamlet and Othello differ from Angelo in that both love the woman they reject. Hamlet's love for Ophelia and Othello's love for Desdemona is, as Hughes wrote in Shakespeare and the Goddess... 'unconditional love'(SGCB 216, 228). Yet both are led to believe that a woman's love cannot be trusted.

The Ghost, with the information that Hamlet's mother has married his father's murderer (and Brother), presents his son with the double vision – the loved and the loathed woman within the one body of the mother.... Hamlet cannot separate Ophelia from his mother. He accuses her of possessing the same treacherous nature by virtue of being

female.(SGCB 133–4).

Othello loves Desdemona and she him [but] Iago ... the emissary of Hell, pours his sexual cynicism into Othello's as-if-sleeping ear... with the sibylline handkerchief, Iago makes the double vision seem real... ..Othello rises mad with his purpose to kill Desdemona.(SGCB 228).

Both the Ghost and Iago are, in Hughes' analysis, cold, manipulative emissaries of the Queen of Hell.

However, it was not Angelo who 'walled up' Ophelia, as Hughes' linked lines might suggest. Ophelia is not 'walled up' in a nunnery, as Hamlet tells her to be; or by her brother's urging that she be wary of Hamlet's professions of love; and not by her father, who charges her to have nothing more to do with Hamlet; but metaphorically, she is 'walled up' by Nature from her distress over Hamlet's cruel rejection of her and from her grief for her father's death. As Laertes says,

Nature is fine in love; and where t'is fine
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves. (Hamlet IV v 155–7)

After Polonius's hurried burial, Ophelia appears 'fantastically drest with Straws and Flowers'⁷. She sings of Hecate's world of death and the grave. And the flowers she gathers are Nature's medicinal herbs.

Even the unlearned among Shakespeare's audiences would have been familiar with herbal medicine and would have known the common folk-names and usages of at least some of Ophelia's flowers. Ophelia describes some of these: Rosemary 'that's for remembrance'; Rue, for regret, 'we may call it herb-grace o'Sundays'; and pansies (Heartsease) 'that's for thoughts' (IV v 68–77). Some of her flowers are specifically associated with the Goddess and with love: pansies and columbine (Granny's bonnet) are both sacred to Venus. Daisies (Bruiswort) were used by girls in the divinatory, petal-counting of 'He loves me: He loves me not' and were common in Mayday garlands. Fragile violets, like pansies, were used in love-spells and for healing; and Giant Fennel once made the thyrsus – the wands of the Dionysian bacchants. All these plants were, and still are, used in herbal medicine. Even nettles (Devil's claw) have long been used to help rheumatic pain (if you roll in them)⁸.

Willow, the branch of which broke and tipped Ophelia into the 'weeping brook', is Hecate's tree of enchantment, sorcery and witchcraft⁹. In the water, 'she chanted snatches of old tunes' and, as Gertrude says, lay 'like a creature native and indu'd / unto that element' before merging with water and earth in 'muddy death'. (IV vii 180–6). A fine alchemical 'dissolution' into the four elements: air (Ophelia's singing), fire (Hecate's witchy tree), earth and water.

'Willow Willow' is not one of Ophelia's songs. It is sung by Desdemona in Shakespeare's Othello, The Moor of Venice. And it was the Goddess, like the mourning dove earlier in Hughes' poem, who 'wept' for the death of these innocent women, and

for the impurities of Love and Spirit which cause their deaths. In Shakespeare and the Goddess..., Hughes writes of the 'special pathos' of Ophelia's helplessness, which 'is inseparable from the cut and wilting flowers'; and he sees her role as being to 'register the human cost, the metaphysical cost to the soul (to the hero's own soul)' of rejecting Love (SGCB 239).

The same could be said of Desdemona's plight. She calls her willow song 'an old thing' sung by a forsaken maid, 'but it expresses her fortune / And she died singing it' (IV iii 28–9). So, too, does it express Desdemona's misfortune.

Othello is a hero who has, indeed 'lopped his rivals' both in war and in love, but The Queen of Hell reveals his imperfections. His military skills link him to 'Fortinbras', the son of the king of Norway who was killed by Hamlet's father in the battle for Denmark. Young Fortinbras (whose name means 'strong-arm') has not 'lopped his rivals' but he is soldier – a man carrying a sword and 'steeled' for battle – and a man who will, as Hamlet says (perhaps ironically) 'find quarrel in a straw / when honour is at stake' (IV iv 51–3). In Hamlet, he completes Nature's uroboric circle of death and rebirth by taking back the Kingdom of Denmark which was originally taken from his father:

For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune
I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me. (V ii 375–7)
Steel, however, is an amalgam of iron and carbon which also contains traces of other elements. It is not a pure metal – not alchemical 'Gold' – so, alchemically, it must still be tested and purified.

In Hamlet, the Goddess's herbal poisons kill many of the characters. 'Gertrude', however, throughout the play demonstrates unconditional love. She loved Hamlet's father: 'she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on' (I ii 143–5). She loves Hamlet's uncle unquestioningly until Hamlet tells her of his guilt. And she is a truly loving mother to Hamlet, even in his seeming madness. Her death is accidental and self-administered. So, as the Mother Goddess, she 'Came again' in Shakespeare's plays in different forms.

There is numerology here in these 11 lines, too: 10 (a complete cycle) + 1 (a new beginning). Nature's Uroborus eats its tail, and the alchemical process begins again.

Uroborus

For Hughes, as early as 1973, when this poem was first published, it was the Goddess, in all her forms, that he saw as the chief alchemical agent in Shakespeare's works. There, she is not just the 'Vitriol' – the dissolving 'Salt' of the first part of Hughes' poem, and the potent 'ancestral sorcerer', Nature, of the second, she is also the Androgyne which, for alchemists, embodies 'the two corresponding powers of the soul' and 'the two forces or poles of human nature (the Sulphur and Quicksilver [Mercury] of inward alchemical work)'¹⁰.

She 'came again' in the next lines of 'An Alchemy', 'rising' as the chaste 'Desdemona', the 'Sacred Bride', who, unlike her maid, Emilia, cannot believe any woman who truly loves her husband could 'abuse her husband in such gross kindv as to 'couch' with another man (IV iii 66). She is also Isabella, the (almost) 'Nun of Vienna' who, like Circe (who turned Ulysses' men into swine), uses Angelo's swinish nature to destroy him before redeeming him in his acceptance of Mariana – thus heralding the advent of the Love Goddess's 'ring–dove'.

She is also Hecate, the Moon Goddess, who in Shakespeare's plays causes the cosmic disturbances which are reflected in the madness and the mental disorders of his characters, and are spoken of frequently as omens portending chaos, such as the social upheaval and jealousy which pervade Caesar's world.

In The Tempest, Prospero's magic creates the tempest that brings Shakespeare's shipwrecked characters to the island where the Great Witch, Sycorax, rules. But when Sycorax's power is overcome and Miranda and Ferdinand are finally joined it becomes an island of love – 'Venus's Island'.

As 'the Blue Hag Hecate', the Goddess stirs the storm in which Macbeth first meets the three 'weird sisters'. Hughes describes them in Shakespeare and the Goddess... as representing 'the Queen of Hell in her most virulent form'(SGCB 234). Shakespeare's Hecate, 'the close contriver of all harms'(III v 6), calls Macbeth 'a wayward son / Spiteful and wrathful; who, as others do, / Loves for his own ends'(III v 11–13), and it is her witches and Macbeth's equally diabolical wife who work on the doubleness in his nature to turn him from the 'noble' 'peerless kinsman'(I iv 58) of 'Sainly Duncan' into a Tarquinian murderer.

There is doubleness throughout Macbeth, where 'fair is foul and foul is fair'(I 11), and it is Macbeth's recognition of his own evil nature, the knowledge of his 'false heart' and of the evil he has done, that tips him into near–madness – to seeing 'daggers of the mind' – and ultimately destroys him:

It is the bloody business informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half–world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings; and wither'd murder,
Alarm'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his steady pace
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. (II i 50–6)

Alchemically, it is significant that rather than directly destroy Macbeth the Goddess deflects 'the dagger' to saintly Duncan in his 'Sanctum'. So, Macbeth's knowledge of his sins includes his own treasonous and sacrilegious murder of an anointed King. It is alchemically necessary, too, that the impure King must die and from his death a new King will be born. Macduff, who kills Macbeth, destroys the impure King, and by his

death becomes the new, potentially purer King. Macduff was 'of no woman born'(V viii 36), and his caesarean birth – technically a virgin birth – links him, mythologically, to the Divine.

An early alchemical treatise translated by Janus Lacinius Theraput the Calabrian describes the stages of the alchemical process. It includes eight allegorical images in three of which the King is killed, the killer joins him in the grave, and from their bones a new King arises, 'full of the grace of God'¹¹:

Killing the King

This is the alchemical pattern of dissolution and recreation ('dissolve and coagulate') which is present in Macbeth, as it is, too, in Richard III, Hamlet and King Lear.

Nor is it just in Shakespeare's Macbeth that the 'crown's contagion' reflects the doubleness in human nature which alchemy must address. It is there, too, in the rivalries for the crown which pervade King Lear. Hughes' references to this play end this section of the poem with mention of 'Gloucester', 'Cordelia' and 'Lear', but the linked lines 'Cordelia guiding / Blinded Gloucester' seem problematic.

In King Lear, it is not Cordelia who guides the blinded Gloucester, but first an old man, then Gloucester's banished, illegitimate son, Edgar.

Gloucester's blinding is an extreme example of the terrible results of double nature in many of the characters in King Lear. It is also a metaphor for Lear's own blindness in the way he values his sons: 'I stumbled when I saw' he tells the old man, recognising Edgar's betrayal of him. It is almost immediately after Lear meets Gloucester, recognises his voice and learns of his blindness, that, mixing 'Reason in madness', he describes himself as 'cut to the brains'(IV vi 72, 192), which in 'An Alchemy', becomes 'Cutting to the brain'.

Cordelia, as the exemplar of unconditional love, could be seen as a guide for those watching or reading King Lear; but the simple phrase, 'Cordelia guiding', belies the importance Hughes attached to Cordelia in Shakespeare's alchemy. Hughes explained this in detail in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, the original title for which was 'The Silence of Cordelia', because, as he wrote to Keith Sagar: 'Cordelia's silence. The key to the whole complex'¹².

In that work, Hughes wrote that 'Shakespeare always presents as the natural path towards the heart's truth, that 'matter of the heart' which will finally reject words'(SGCB 278); and Cordelia fails to find words to express her love for Lear, because 'Nothing can pretend to express the truth'(SGCB 277). 'Ordinary words' he wrote 'are inherently false but can encompass the truth in their fashion'... 'glanced at crookedly, as by the Fool in King Lear'(SGCB 278).

It is the Fool who points out Lear's errors of judgment, telling him soon after his division of the crown: 'thou had'st little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden one

away'(I iv 157–8). And Lear's 'under-crown lightning' – his madness – begins when both Regan and Goneril drive him away.

The most powerful dissolution in this section of 'An Alchemy', and in Shakespeare's play, is the madness of Lear, caused by his own misinterpretations of love, his rejection of Cordelia's 'unconditional love', and by his obstinacy and pride. Hughes places the blame firmly on the Goddess in her retributive form as 'The Boar', something he only explains fully in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being. It is she who alchemically dissolves and re-constitutes Lear. The storm is hers: 'The lightnings are heavenly fires and suffering of rejected Divine Love, alias the rage of the Boar'(SGCB 274); and Lear's madness – 'the charge of the Boar' – is, 'a psychological event, a shock wave of death-rebirth'(SGCB 383). Her presence as Nightmare, with her 'nine-fold' minions, is attested to in the play by Edgar in his disguise as Poor Tom where he invokes Saint Swithin to banish her¹³:

Saint Withhold footed thrice the 'old;
He met the night-mare and her nine-fold;
Bid her alight,
And her troth plight,
And, aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!br /> (III iv 115–9)

In Hughes' poem, it is 'The Boar's Moons' that are 'mangling' Lear's 'sainted flesh' ('sainted' because he is an anointed King). In Shakespeare's play, Gloucester refers to the evil portent of 'the late eclipses of the sun and moon'(I ii 97); references to devils and fiends abound; and it is the Goddess's poisonous herbs – 'Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow / In our sustaining corn'(IV iv 5) that Lear is seen wearing before Cordelia finally meets him again.

Cordelia, for Hughes, demonstrates 'total, unconditional love', and she does, in the end, guide her father to an understanding of what Love truly is. Once they are re-united, his 'great rage' is 'kill'd in him' and he becomes like a child again and begs her forgiveness:

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness:
(V ii 79; V iii 10–12)

At the end of Shakespeare's play, both die and a new order is established; but in 'An Alchemy' Hughes ends this section of his poem with the single line 'Lear Furens' – Lear Raging.

Nigredo

The next eleven lines of Hughes' poem form another complete alchemically cycle, dissolving Lear's rage in an alchemical process in which he enters the Nigredo, the dissolution in Raven-like darkness.

He has 'plucked out' his 'dog-hearted daughters', 'Regan'... and 'boarish' 'Goneril'(IV iii 45; III vii 57). He has rejected the daughter he 'loved most', because she 'could not

heave [her] heart into her mouth' (I i 89–90), so she who had been 'his Joy' 'vanished', until they are re–united and he recognises the truth worth of her love.

Ring dove

At this point in Shakespeare's play, she dies, but the 'warm body' in Lear's arms, in the linked lines of Hughes' poem – becomes, alchemically, the warm body of the 'Rock–dove of Aphrodite', Goddess of Love – thus completing another alchemical cycle of death and rebirth. So, yet again, the alchemical bird of the Sprit flies from the darkness. It leaves 'a feather only', but this is a symbol of hope, and also a sign that more alchemical work still needs to be done.

A single line follows, which, although isolated by the pattern in which the lines before and after it are grouped, links Aphrodite's feather – the germ of alchemical 'Gold' – first to 'Timon', then to 'Coriolanus', and then to others in the fifteen lines which follow it. In Shakespeare and the Goddess, Hughes brings together Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, Coriolanus and Antony and Cleopatra, as he does in 'An Alchemy', calling them 'the drama of a period of transitions' in which the 'Gnostic redemption of the hero and heroine together' is foreshadowed (SGCB 283).

This alchemical 'marriage' of the male and female elements (the 'King' and 'Queen') of the increasingly purified Base Matter is a necessary stage in the alchemical work.

King and Queen

For Timon, in Timon of Athens, this is not possible. There is no female heroine in the play and Timon's 'unconditional love' is for Athens and its citizens, until the treachery of those he had believed to be his friends enrages him and he abandons Athens to exist in a cave in the woods.

Hughes called Shakespeare's Timon of Athens 'a vision of the meaningless absurd appetites of despiritualized mankind' (SGCB 288). Timon, whose 'need for social love of his friends' induced him to lavish his gold (his money and, metaphorically, his Soul) on them, has no 'spiritual passion' – nothing the alchemical art can work on. His reliance on nature to support him in his cave does not redeem him, instead, he gives the gold he finds there to General Alcibiades to make war on Athens and its people, with the words 'There's more gold: – / Do you damn others and let it damn you / And ditches grave you all' (IV iii 65). So, Aphrodite's feather, like Timon himself (as the linkage of lines in 'An Alchemy' suggests), is 'damned with gold'.

However, Shakespeare ends his play with recognition not only of Timon's 'soul bereft' 'latter spirits' but also with a note of hope. Timon's death, 'entomb'd upon the very hem of the sea' returns him, alchemically, to the mother waters of the alembic; and there is hope, too, in Alcibiades' change–of–heart and his vow to 'Make war breed peace; make peace stint war, make each / Prescribe to other, as each other's leech' (V iv 80–1).

Coriolanus, like Timon, focuses his love on a city (Rome) and its people until they reject him. He, too, turns violently against his former love but, as Hughes wrote in

Shakespeare and the Goddess... : 'Coriolanus's Rome contains the essential nucleus that Timon's Athens lacked: the female embodiment of the hero's soul and love': his wife, Virgilia, and his mother, Volumnia(SGCB 293). These women embody the female essence of alchemy and represent 'unconditional love'. It is their love which stems Coriolanus's rage and rouses enough love in him to turn him from his intended destruction of Rome. So, love brings a meeting between the female and male parts of Coriolanus' own nature, and, although he dies, the germ of alchemical 'Gold' that 'carried Coriolanus' to this condition remains.

The next fourteen lines of this poem are difficult to interpret. Much later, when Hughes wrote his 'Introduction' to Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, he was aware that, 'for anyone who does not know the plays rather well... the whirl of names will sound like a betting shop in a basement of the Tower of Babel'(SGCB 35). There is a similar danger in 'An Alchemy', and, without recourse to the close examination of the plays that Hughes offered in Shakespeare and the Goddess..., it is hard to make sense of some of the lines in this poem. Hughes' focus in Shakespeare and the Goddess... was on the themes of the Tragic Equation and The Rival Brothers, which he saw as a developing pattern in Shakespeare's work. He also believed that Shakespeare's ultimate goal was to create balance and harmony in his characters and, through the 'idea of drama as a ritual for manipulating the soul'(SGCB 33), in his audience. This, too, is Hughes' goal in 'An Alchemy'.

Peacocks Tail

In this section of the poem, now that the cyclical repetition of 'dissolve and coagulate' is almost complete, Hughes brings together the feathers of hope that will form the alchemical Peacock's Tail, the colours of which are 'an emblem of the Great Work'¹⁴ signalling the near-achievement of the pure spiritual 'Gold'.

And it is Aphrodite/Venus, Goddess of Love, who governs the alchemical stage in which the Peacock's Tail appears. In the richly illustrated 16th Century alchemical treatise, *Splendor Solis*¹⁵, she rides in a golden chariot drawn by two doves, above the alchemical flask where the Peacock spreads its magnificent tail, and the flask is surrounded by loving couples in a verdant landscape¹⁶.

In the linked lines of Hughes' poem, he now collects a feather of 'gold' which has been 'crushed from Caesar'. Julius Caesar is not one of the plays Hughes deals with in Shakespeare and the Goddess..., but in that play Caesar's nature seems fairly balanced: his love for his wife is clear, so too is his care for the Republic and for the people of Rome. Unlike Timon and Coriolanus he does not reject one for the other. He is killed by the conspirators, but his spirit remains intact. Before his assassination, Brutus urged care:

O! that we could come by Caesar's spirit,
And not dismember Caesar!
Let's be sacrificers but not butchers...
(II i 166–70)

And after the deed was done:

O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet!
Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords
In our own proper entrails.
(V iii 94–6)

So, the 'Gold' of Caesar's spirit, freed from bodily impurities, can be added to the Peacock's plumes.

Another feather is gathered from Antony and Cleopatra. Cleopatra is the 'Old Nile Serpent'. Longing for Antony when he is away in Rome, she imagines him missing her: 'He's speaking now, / Or murmuring, 'Where's my serpent of the Nile' / For so he calls me.' (I v 30). And she presents herself as the goddess, Isis, who is the tutelary god of her Egyptian realm, frequently called on by Shakespeare's characters throughout the play. In *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* Hughes describes Cleopatra as 'the avatar of Isis, as she presents herself and is understood to be' (SGCB 315) (cf. III vi 20–3). In all her 'infinite variety' (II ii 277), she incorporates all aspects of 'Moon-browed Isis / Bride and Mother' – and also, in the eyes of the Romans, she is Queen of Hell – 'Salt Cleopatra' (II i 26), a gypsy and a witch.

For Hughes, Antony and Cleopatra marked an important step in Shakespeare's work. In it, Antony and Cleopatra 'exist in a divine world in which the Goddess and her consort are united' (SGCB 301). Shakespeare 'painfully destroys the Puritan ego' which is Antony's rational Roman character, 'and unites both hero and Female on the transcendental plane of Divine Love' (SGCB 299). Antony 'renounces his claim to any part of the tragic world of the Roman power struggles' (SGCB 308), and he accepts 'all the failings (betrayals etc.) of the human Cleopatra... loves her, in spite of everything, with 'total unconditional love'' (SGCB 314).

Regardless of this union of Male and Female essences in the love of Antony and Cleopatra, there is no harmony in their world, nor can they achieve that. So, the alchemical process is still incomplete and, although a feather of hope may have been gathered, Antony and Cleopatra die. Thus, their essences are returned to the alchemical 'egg' to become, again, for Hughes and (as he believed) for Shakespeare, just one more step towards the final achievement of the alchemical 'Gold'.

The next line of 'An Alchemy' is difficult to interpret. Neither Antony nor Cleopatra were 'Mourning a Rome'. Antony had given up his Roman self in his love of Cleopatra. He dies honourably, by suicide, 'a Roman, by a Roman / Valiantly Vanquished' (IV xv 60), but his concern even as he dies is for Cleopatra, not for Rome. Cleopatra, who is grief stricken, mourns Antony as 'Noblest of men', 'Husband'¹⁷, but she does not mourn 'a Rome'.

So, is it Isis / Aphrodite who is 'Mourning a Rome'? Both are linked to this phrase by the unpunctuated lines of the poem and, alchemically, this would make sense. Julius Caesar's Roman Republic died after his death. War and chaos ensued, as is clear in

Antony and Cleopatra, and the chance of a Rome of balance and harmony was lost.

In the next line of Hughes' poem, 'Leontes banished' may refer to Leontes in *A Winter's Tale*, where harmony is restored at the end of the play, but it is Leontes Posthumus in *Cymbeline* who is banished 'to Italy (i.e. back to Rome)' (SGCB 336) after marrying the British king's daughter, Imogen, without the king's consent.

In *Cymbeline*, Hughes saw reflections of the religious dissociation of England from Catholic Rome which was still the cause of persecution and death in Shakespeare's world¹⁸. He suggested that Shakespeare's reuniting of Imogen and Leontes Posthumus, 'beyond their hope, and, as if beyond death', represents the re-establishment of balance and harmony – a new reign of the 'understanding of the heart' (SGCB 339), and a new version, for Shakespeare, of the expression of Aphrodite's total and unconditional love. In this play, too, Hughes suggested that 'the drama can be read as the alchemical transformation of a single soul' – a 'purgation and remaking' – which 'can be read as the sin and redemption of Posthumus' (SGCB 340).

The sudden reappearance of Lear in the poem as 'Lear redivivus', harks back to Lear's rebirth and transformation when he rises phoenix-like from the tempests (literal and psychological) and is reunited with Cordelia, at which point, as Hughes wrote in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, Shakespeare showed Lear's 'true self reborn – reunited with his beloved who is also reborn' (SGCB 323). So, Lear and Posthumus, both re-made and reborn, add to the feathers in the alchemical Peacock's Tail.

For Hughes, the full display of the Peacock's Tail culminated in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, when Aphrodite literally 'found breath in Marina'.

The virtuous Pericles, believing his chaste wife Thaisa to have died in childbirth while they are on his ship bound for Tyre, is forced by superstitious sailors to cast her body overboard in a chest. Thaisa is found and revived by the skills of Cerimon, a Lord of Ephesus, and enters the temple of Diana there as a votaress. Pericles leaves his new-born daughter, Marina, in the care of Cleon, Governor of Tharsus, but Cleon's wife becomes jealous of her and arranges for her to be murdered. To avoid suspicion, Cleon and his wife arrange for a statue of Marina to be erected mourning her death and claiming that she had 'withered in her spring of year' (IV iv 36). Marina, however, survives the attempted murder but is captured by pirates who sell her to a brothel, where, much to the dismay of the brothel owners, her prayers to Diana help her not only to retain her virginity but also to find the words to persuade brothel customers to abandon their dishonourable ways.

Marina, who has retained her strength and purity, and whose 'breath' is used in the art of persuasion, has prevailed over seemingly impossible odds. She is ultimately reunited with Pericles and Thaisa, both of whom have demonstrated their own pure souls in the play. Unlike other plays, all remain alive, and Pericles, for Hughes was one of the plays in which 'the denouement is idealized, transcendent and lifted into a music that does seem unearthly' (SGCB 331).

'Redeemed', in the next line of the poem, is a carefully chosen word. Its meaning encompasses the worldly and the spiritual. Marina redeemed the brothel customers by turning them away from sin. Aphrodite redeemed the fragments of pure love that existed in the souls of those chosen by Shakespeare as characters in his plays, where, as Hughes believed, Shakespeare changed and re-made (brought redemption to) his audience through the rituals of his drama. The alchemist redeems all these fragments in the process of creating the Peacock's Tail; and the alchemical Peacock spreads its valuable tail-feathers to make a spectacular display before discarding them into the flask to precipitate the final redemption of the alchemical process.

George Ripley, in his 15th century alchemical scroll, identified the Peacock as 'The Bird of Hermes' and showed it shedding its feathers, a process he described as 'eating' them, in order to unite White (Queen/ Female essence) and Red (King/Male essence) and create the Philosophers' Stone (the 'Gold') of spiritual rebirth¹⁹:

The Bird of Hermes is my name
Eating my wings to make me tame.

In the Sea withouten leese
Standeth the Bird of Hermes:
Eating his Wings variable,
And thereby maketh himself more stable;
When all his Fethers be agon,
He standeth still there as a stone;
Here is now both White and Red,
And also the Stone to quicken the dead.

Hughes' line 'Redeemed all Tempests', however, requires the elucidation of the meaning of Shakespeare's tempests that he provided in Shakespeare and the Goddess... . There, he discussed 'the storm' as 'evolved through the action' of Shakespeare's plays (SGCB 382), and having not just a dramatic function but being also a worldly reflection of the Goddess's anger and (as in King Lear) a physical manifestation of the psychological 'shock-wave of death-rebirth'(SGCB 383).

Marina not only adds the final plume to the Peacock's Tail, she also draws together, through the unpunctuated lines of Hughes' poem, the feathers of 'Gold' Shakespeare found in the souls of Timon, Coriolanus, Caesar, Antony, Cleopatra, Lear, Leontes, and Posthumus. The spiritual/psychological deaths and rebirths of these characters redeem all tempests – assuaging the Goddess's anger and healing each one who has redeemed his or her soul.

The storm in Shakespeare's final play, The Tempest, is different. It is summoned by the magician, Prospero, who controls all four elements – Air (Ariel), Earth (Caliban), Fire and Water (the lightning, thunder and rain of the storm). Before dealing with The Tempest, however, Hughes, in 'An Alchemy', brought together the Phoenix and the Turtle, the two creatures which in Shakespeare's poem of that title represent pure,

unconditional love²⁰.

Shakespeare's poem was first published in 1601 among other 'Diverse poeticall essaies on the former subject; viz: the Turtle and Phoenix. Done by the best and chieftest of our modern writers', which supplemented Robert Chester's 'Loves Martyr, or, Rosalins Complaint. Allegorically shadowing the truth of Love'²¹. Shakespeare's poem is an 'anthem' for the death of these two creatures which, in Chester's poem, are united in a pure Platonic love and die together so that the Phoenix may be reborn. As Shakespeare described them:

So they loved, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one;
Two distincts, Division none;
Number there in love was slaine.

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;
Distance, and no space was seene
Twixt this Turtle and his Queene
But in them it were a wonder.
(lines 25–32)

Perhaps it was the Phoenix as the Bird of Hermes to which Hughes referred when he wrote that 'His Kiss of Life / Stirred the Turtle'; or it could have been Shakespeare himself, whose alchemy Hughes was tracing here.

In any case, Hughes changed the gender of each of these lovers. His Phoenix, in 'An Alchemy', becomes male, like that of George Ripley, and his turtle (which is a male turtle–dove in Chester's poem and in Shakespeare's) becomes Aphrodite's turtle–dove, which first shed its feather into this section of his poem. Aphrodite is the moon goddess whose powers control the cycles of menstruation. In 'An Alchemy', her dove now becomes the 'Turtle / Of the waters of amnios' – immersed in the amniotic fluid that surrounds the developing foetus in 'The lunar cauldron' of the alembic womb.

The next five lines of 'An Alchemy' remove the Queen of Hell in her darkest forms from 'the Tree': 'black Venus / double tongued' in her power to inspire love and to destroy her lovers, as in Venus and Adonis; the 'swine uddered', 'foul witch' 'Sycorax'²², who is mother of Caliban in *The Tempest*; and 'Lilith the night–crow', the Hebrew owl–goddess, banished first wife of Adam, seducer of men and stealer of children, who is also the screech–owl – 'The shrieking harbinger / Foul precursor of the fiend' (5–6) who is banned from the mourning ceremony in Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle*.

All these 'Slid from the Tree' which, in alchemy, is 'The Tree of Diana' (Aphrodite), the 'Philosopher's Tree', a pure, moon–white, crystalline growth which fills the flask and signals the near completion of the alchemist's Great Work.

Next, in another reference to *The Tempest*, 'the Rainbow / Breasted dove' is released with 'a leaf of light', and linked to Prospero's virginal daughter, Miranda, who falls

instantly in love with Ferdinand, the first man she has ever seen who is not her father or the monstrous Caliban. At first, she thinks Ferdinand is 'a spirit' (I ii 488), which seems like 'a thing divine' (I ii 498), or, in Hughes's words, an 'Adam / Adonis'; and Ferdinand thinks she is 'most sure the goddess / On whom these airs attend' (I ii 505). The 'miracle', may be intended to refer to Miranda's meeting with Ferdinand or to the appearance of the benign, Heavenly goddesses who are summoned by Prospero in Shakespeare's *Masque*: or to both. Hughes, in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, wrote of the reaction of the young couple as mutual 'love at first sight' which 'becomes mutual adoration and promise of eternal love' (SGCB 437); and he described their first words to each other as 'exchanges taking place on the transcendental plane' (SGCB 415). He called the *Masque*, which unites the Heavenly and the Earth-bound, an 'alchemical vision' (SGCB 444), 'The sacred nuptial ceremony' (SGCB 441), and 'an incantatory magic spell, a Hermetic ritual in the active mode' (SGCB 442).

The *Masque* in *The Tempest* brings together Juno, 'the queen o' th' sky' (whose 'peacock's fly amain' as she approaches); Iris, who calls herself Juno's 'watery arch and messenger'; and 'rich Ceres', 'Bounteous lady' Earth-Mother and goddess of fertility. Juno bids them join her to

Bless this twain, that they may prosperous be
And honoured in their issue
(IV i 57–72).

In 'An Alchemy' Hughes placed Iris's rainbow on the breast of one of Venus/Aphrodite's doves, which, in the *Masque*, Juno describes as drawing Venus's chariot across the sky after he son, Cupid, has worked 'some wanton charm upon this man and maid' (IV i 101).

Hughes' alchemy, here, was different to that of Shakespeare but for both the blessing of the chaste union of Miranda and Ferdinand by the gods was necessary for the creation of the new, harmonious world which Prospero sought to create. The chastity, too, which Prospero imposed on them until they all return to Naples and 'see the nuptial \ Of these dear-beloved solemnized' (V 367), ensures that the alchemical 'Gold' of their union is free from bodily impurities.

Dianas Tree

A woodcut from the alchemical text *Uraltes Chymische Werke*, attributed to Abraham Eliazar, 1735, illustrates the union which Hughes and Shakespeare describe. A double Uroborus forming a completed circle in front of Diana's Tree is titled, 'Unite Them', and shows the union of the Universal Divine Spirit (the winged snake), with the Earth-bound prima materia (humankind)²³.

In *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, Hughes wrote that *The Tempest* 'gives the impression of being the final product of a long alchemical labour' (SGCB 447)²⁴. He went on to develop a complex (and questionable) myth-based explanation for the rebirth which traditionally follows the creation of the 'Gold' (the 'Philosopher's Stone') that he believed happened with 'the alchemical marriage' (SGCB 451) of Miranda and

Ferdinand. Shakespeare, however, allows Prospero to postpone the actual marriage until after the play has ended and all but he have returned to Naples. Before this occurs, Prospero will 'abjure' the 'rough magic' he has been performing; chase away 'the ignorant fumes that mantle' the 'pure reason' of those who had plotted to kill him; pardon all who had conspired against him, including Caliban; and free Ariel. Then, he vows,

I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the Earth,
And deeper than ever did plummet sound
I'll drown my book.v (V i 60–6).

In 'An Alchemy', Hughes, too, avoids the rebirth. Instead, in lines that step down the page, to mimic the action he describes, he returns everything to the alchemical 'crucible' of 'Tiamat', the most ancient scaly monster of the waters of Chaos from whom, in Babylonian myth, our world was created:

The Mother

The Scales

The Coil

Of the Matter

And he sinks it 'With Prospero's bones / And the sounding Book', into her fathomless deeps.

Prospero, in his final speeches, anticipates his own death, having given up his magic:

'What strength I have's my own / Which is most faint'
(V 3–4).

'I will retire me to my Milan,
Where every third thought shall be my grave'
(V 68–9.)

Borrowing the nautical imagery of depth–sounding, used so precisely by Shakespeare in Prospero's speech, Hughes' final lines suggest that Shakespeare, as that 'the supreme alchemist Prospero/, Shakespeare'(SGCB 431), shares this ending, and that the 'sounding Book' may well be Shakespeare's own works, in which he plumbed the depths of alchemy.

Hughes' poem, 'An Alchemy', is a remarkable work but its complexities make it impossible to understand unless the reader has as broad an understanding of Shakespeare's works as Hughes did. Nor does it comply with what Hughes called the simple, direct, honest speech, which he later admired in the vacanas of the Siva–worshipping mystics of Southern Indian²⁵. Rather, it is as he described Shakespeare's language to Ekbert Faas– 'full of knotted up complexities and piled up

obscurities' which are, in fact, 'utterly direct and utterly simple' that by 'hitting one nail on the head it makes fifty others jump in of their own accord'²⁶.

For Hughes and Shakespeare, and for alchemists like George Ripley, Abraham Eliazar and others how wrote and sometimes illustrated their alchemical texts, their alchemy was performed through the ritual manipulation of words, images, symbols and, above all, poetry. But alchemical texts, full as they usually are of paradoxes, riddles and allegories, are notoriously difficult to interpret and are often described as a labyrinth.

16th century alchemist, doctor and philosopher, Paracelsus, seemed to suggest the difficulties when he subtitled his *Coelum Philosophorum* (The Book of Vexations), although he may have been referring to the chemical disturbances brought to the *prima materia* in an alchemist's laboratory. Artephius, a 12th century philosopher puts the warning more clearly²⁷:

He that takes the words of the hermetic philosophers literally, he even already, having lost the thread of Ariadne, wanders in the midst of the labyrinth, multiplies errors, and casts away his money for naught.

Hughes' poem, 'An Alchemy', fits well into this labyrinthine pattern but it is not an alchemical text outlining a method of obtaining gold. Instead it charts the alchemy process he discerned in of Shakespeare's work, and, at the same time, it embodies Hughe' own poetic ritual of alchemical transmutation.

Addendum: Shakespeare, Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism and Alchemy.

In his 'Introduction' in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes wrote of 'the pervasive influence' of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism on 'the intellectual life of England' at the time when Shakespeare was creating his poetry and plays, and he 'picked out' what he believed to be 'the salient features of the movement as it which came within the orbit of Shakespeare's known social and political world.' and as it 'can be seen to relate to his imaginative life'(SGCB 18–19).

To do this, he relied strongly on the work of Dame Frances Yates, who, in her book, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, wrote that 'the occult philosophy of the Elizabethan age was no minor concern of a few adepts. It was the main philosophy of the age, stemming from John Dee and his movement'²⁸.

Yates traced the development of Occult Neoplatonism and Christian Cabbala from its origins to the high point of its influence in Renaissance Italy, and from there to its influence in Elizabethan and Jamesian England, where it initially flourished but later became associated in the popular mind with dark magic, trickery, witches and ghosts.

Fundamental to the transmission of this learning from Italy to England, were Giordano Bruno, John Dee and the eldest son of the Earl of Pembroke, Sir Philip Sidney.

Bruno, was an Italian Dominican Friar whose poetic re-interpretation of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism and Hebrew Cabbala in Christian terms taught that we and the world are a reflection of the Divine, as in the Hermetic principle 'As above So below'. Since, 'All is One', we are able, by the use of memory techniques and imagination, to cleanse our souls and rise from the darkness of the world to the Divine Source. In 1583, whilst in England, Bruno presented three notoriously badly received lectures to doctors of philosophy at Oxford University, which focussed on Copernican theory in the context of the astral magic of the Neoplatonic Hermeticist, Marsilio Ficino²⁹. He published a number of books based on hermetic philosophy and morality, including the series of mystical love poems, *De gli Eroici Furori* (On the Heroic Frenzies), which he dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney, with whom he had become close. This dedication includes extensive notes about the furor of passionate love, and the power of Mystical Love to make the soul divine and heroic.

Sidney's own closely argued essay, 'In Defence of Poesie', links true poetry (that made by Poets (not 'versifiers that neede never aunswere to the name of Poets'³⁰) to Platonic 'divine frenzy', and 'Planet-like Music'³¹. Poetry, he wrote, through the alchemy of inspiration, memory and imagination can 'hold children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And pretending no more, doth intende the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue'³². He and his circle of friends which included the poets Gabriel Harvey, Edward Dyer and Edmund Spencer, were studying the works of John Dee, and they had dedicated themselves to the reformation of English poetry³³. They called their group, 'The Areopagus', after the aristocratic Athenian council in Ancient Greece³⁴.

It is believed, and it is very likely, that Bruno also met Dr John Dee, who was Sidney's tutor and patron. Dee was a brilliant and learned mathematician and astronomer who became astrologer-in-chief to Queen Elizabeth I³⁵. He was also a practicing cabbalist and, through his 'medium', Edmund Kelly, he consulted angelic guides who dictated to him the work which he published as *Monas Heiroglyphica*. This highly symbolic and difficult text would, he claimed, revealed the secret mysteries of nature and would revolutionise current knowledge.

Sidney's younger sister, Mary, Countess of Pembroke, was also very influential. She was a respected poet, and, as John Aubrey wrote of her – 'She was the greatest patronesse of witt and learning of any lady in her time. She was a great chymist and spent yearly a great deale in that study. She kept for her laborator in the house Adrian Gilbert (vulgarly called Dr. Gilbert), halfe brother to Sir Walter Raleigh, who was a great chymist in those dayes'³⁶. Most importantly, she founded a literary group known as 'The Wilton Circle' which met regularly at her home, Wilton House. A number of prominent poets benefited from meetings with this group and from her patronage, including Edmund Spencer (who dedicated his poem, 'The Ruins of Time' to her and addressed a sonnet to her which he prefixed to *The Faerie Queen*), Gabriel Harvey, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, John Aubrey and Ben Jonson. Through these poets, and particularly through the work of Spencer and Jonson, the philosophies of Neoplatonism and the art and magic of Alchemy became widely known, not just among

the literati but to the English people in general.

Spencer's Hymnes, which 'abound in references to Plato and to Platonic philosophy'³⁷, express the Platonic and Cabbalistic importance of transformative Love. This and the Platonic and Cabbalistic ideas which fostered creativity in the Italian Renaissance – ideas of universal harmony and the Hermetic/alchemical transmission of divine emanations to our world through planetary influence – is fundamental in his poem, *The Faerie Queen*, which was widely read in England. Alchemy, as an alleged means of transforming lead into gold in a laboratory, was familiar to most people, and Christopher Marlow drew on it in this debased form to create *Doctor Faustus*. Ben Jonson also made fun of it in his popular play, *The Alchemist*.

The spiritual purpose of Alchemy, which like that of Christian Cabbala works to purify and transform the Spirit of human individuals, was less widely known but was very familiar to the poets of the Areopagus and the Wilton Circle. Sir Henry Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, was the husband of Mary Sidney. He shared Mary's interest in the arts, and in 1591 he became the patron of a group of actors and playwrights known as 'The Earl Of Pembroke's Men'. Between 1591 and 1593, William Shakespeare was a member of this group and among the plays performed by them were several of his works. When the London theatres closed due to plague, Pembroke's Men toured the country, but, as Peter Ackroyd notes: '[they] were not simply a group of travelling players. They were invited to perform before the queen during the Christmas season, a signal honour for a group so recently established'³⁸.

In London's relatively small circle of aristocratic patrons, intellectuals, poets, playwrights and actors, William Shakespeare, as Stephen Greenblatt and Peter Ackroyd have both shown in their biographies, knew, lived, and often worked closely alongside many of these men. He was also, as Frances Yates has shown, and as Ted Hughes attests in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, very familiar with the theory and practice of all the occult arts.

Yates wrote that 'Though Shakespeare never wielded a wand, nor thought of himself as a magus, he is a magician, master of the spell-binding use of words and poetry as magic. This was an art in which he was supreme'³⁹.

Shakespeare's wand was his pen, and Hughes and many other writers have divined occult purpose in his poems and plays. For Hughes, Shakespeare's whole opus had an overall alchemical and cabbalistic pattern, and in his own poem, 'An Alchemy', he created an alchemical text which he structured to demonstrate this.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The name of Helena's father, Gerard de Narbon, would have reminded many in Shakespeare's audience of the popular *Herbal* published in 1597 by John Gerard.

2. 'I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live / Into your guidance' (III 99–101).
3. 'Now Dian, from thy altar do I fly / And to imperial Love, that god most high / Do my sighs stream' (III 71–3).
4. Jung, C.G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Princeton University Press, 1952, p. 202.
5. This stage direction occurs in the 1790 Nicholas Rowe edition. Rowe depended on the 4th Folio (1685) but, being an actor, he added some helpful stage directions.
6. There is much scholarly debate about the identity of the 'long purples, / That liberal shepherds give a grosser name / But our cold maids do dead man's fingers call them'.(IV vii 193–5). The most likely plant is *Orchis mascula*, an early flowering common orchid with long spikes of purple flowers, sometimes called 'Dog's bollocks' or 'Fool's bollocks', because of the shape of the buds. Its root is two testicle-sized white tubers with fine white rootlets, and it has long been used as a medicine for fertility and for sexual disorders.
(<http://www.sussexflora.org.uk/2020/04/orchis-mascula-early-purple-orchid>).
7. Circe had a riverside cemetery planted with willows and dedicated to Hecate. Willow trees frequently overhang water–courses and are commonly called 'weeping willows'. The medicinal ingredient in the bark of the tree, acetylsalicylic acid, is the active ingredient in the anti-inflammatory pain–killer, Aspirin.
8. Burckhardt, T. *Alchemy*, Alement Books, 1987. pp. 149–51.
9. The full version of *A Form and Method of Perfecting Bases Metals* by Janus Lacinius Therapus the Calabrian, which is thought to be a copy of an originally treatise by 14th century alchemist Petrus Bonus, can be found of the Alchemy Website at https://www.alchemywebsite.com/petrus_bonus.html.
10. Sagar, K. (ed.) *The Letters of Ted Hughes & Keith Sagar*, The British Library, 2102, pp.10, 181, 212.
11. Saint Withhol is Saint Swithin, an Anglo–Saxon saint whose association with meteorological disturbances is still part of local folk–superstitions: if it rains of Saint Swithin's day it is said that it will continue to rain for 40 days.
12. White, A.E. (ed) *The Hermetic Museum Vol II*, 'An Open Entrance to the Palace of the King, by an anonymous sage and lover of the truth', 1893, p.194.
13. *Splendor Solis* is attributed to Salomon Trismosin (probably a pseudonym). Images from an 1582 manuscript can be seen on the British Library webpage at <https://www.bl.uk/a-history-of-magic/collection-items/splendor-solis>. A full version with larger images is available at <http://www.chymist.com/Splendor%20solis.pdf>.

14. This image is in the public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Splendor_Solis:Kupferstichkabinett Berlin.
15. Antony and Cleopatra: (IV xv 69) ; 'Husband, I come. / Now to that name my courage prove my title' (V ii 335).
16. In his 'Note' to A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse, Hughes wrote of the effects of the 'historical forces' – the 'national trauma' – of the suppression of 'the old Catholic and the new Puritan' which he believed influenced Shakespeare's life and his work. (pp.165–6). He expanded on this in Shakespeare and the Goddess... (pp.74–78). Using alchemical symbolism, he wrote that 'Since Shakespeare was born, lived and died within the crucible, his art evolved as a kind of salamander. It had time to develop the means to thrive and to deal with the conditions and forces that shaped him'(p.78).
17. Ashmole, Elias (ed.) Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum, 1562. 'Verses Belonging to an Emblematic Scrowle: Supposed to be invented by Geo: Ripley'.(p.376). A digital reproduction is available on the Internet Archive website at <https://archive.org>.
18. Hughes chose, 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' as the final poem for A Choice Shakespeare's Verse, Faber, 1971 pp.161–163.
19. A digitised version of this book, including Shakespeare's 'essaie' (pp.182–4), can be found on the Internet Archive website at <https://archive.org>.
20. The Tempest(I ii 308). In Shakespeare and the Goddess..., Hughes wrote of Sycorax as 'the African witch Sycorax (swine–crow)'(SGCB 471). Robert Graves, in The White Goddess, p.123., called her 'Pig Raven'.
21. Skea, A. Image drawn from Eliazar, Utrales Chymische Werke – various sources.
22. One section of Hughes' discussion of the play is also headed 'The Tempest as a keyboard to the Complete Works'(SGCB 462).
23. Skea, A. Ted Hughes' Vacanas. <https://ann.skea.com/THVacanas.html>.
24. Faas, E. The Unaccommodated Universe, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980. p.203.
25. An adaptation from various sources of Artephius's Liber Secretus, including: Lapidus (Skinner), In Pursuit of Gold; Spearman, 1976 on Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>.); and Roob, Alchemy and Mysticism, Taschen, 1997, p. 36, ref. Bibl. des Philosophes Chimique, Paris. Some versions end: 'he will never find the way out'.
26. Yates, F. The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age, Routledge, 1999, p.191.
27. Yates, F. Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, University of Chicago Press,

1964, pp.207–210.

28 Elizabeth Porges Watson (ed), *Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella and other writings*. Sir Philip Sidney. Dent, London, 1997. p.91.

29. Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, p.199.

30. Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, p.101.

31. Yates, F. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p.187.

32. Gabriel Harvey referred to this title in a letter to Edmund Spencer at a time when they were both part of Sidney's circle. See Yates, F. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, Routledge, 1999. p.112.

33. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, pp.187–8.

34. 'Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1555–1621)' in Clarke, A. (ed.), *Brief Lives*, Vol.1. by John Aubrey, Clarendon Press, 1898, p. 1165–6. Digital copy at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/47787>.

35. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p.113.

36. Ackroyd, P. *Shakespeare: The Biography*, Chatto & Windus, London, 2005. p.176.

37. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p. 190.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Ted Hughes, 'An Alchemy' and Shakespeare.

Ann Skea

Part of this paper was presented at the British Library Symposium on Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity on September 15th, 2023.

NOTE: Because of the limits placed on quotations by copyright laws, the reader will need a copy of the poem in front of them. Hughes' much later and far more detailed exposition of his theory in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (Faber 1991) is also frequently referred to in order to elucidate some of the puzzles of the poem. Quotations from 'An Alchemy' (THCP 279–282) are shown in bold italics.

When Ted wrote 'An Alchemy' for a Limited Edition anthology to be published by the Globe Theatre Trust, he expected that readers would recognise Shakespeare's characters and would be familiar with the plays in which they appeared.

The curious structure of his poem, however, with its staggered lines and lack of punctuation, makes strange connections between characters from different plays. In effect, Ted was creating an Alchemical matrix, which was the 'Base Matter' from which he intended to produce the Alchemical 'Gold' of his belief in the Alchemical nature of Shakespeare's works.

He saw Shakespeare's works as 'ritual, transformative drama', and when he sent a copy of his poem to Peter Redgrove in 1973, he told him that it derived from his 'note to my selection of Shakespearev' Verse – about the unity of the poetic theme'¹. Almost 20 years later, he would expound that theme in detail in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* but he had already decided, as he told Redgrove, that 'Not one scholar in a hundred knows Shakespeare well enough to guess whether I have something or haven't. Not one in a hundred of those hundreds has the nose for poetry to know what I'm distinguishing in the total Himalayas of Shakespeare's ore'².

Hughes was not interested in the worldly, laboratory-based alchemy from which modern chemistry derives. His interest was in the spiritual alchemy which began in Italy when, in 1460, Cosimo de Medici, instructed Marsilio Ficino to translate an ancient Greek document, purportedly based on the writings of an Egyptian sage known as Hermes Trismegistus. These Hermetic writings were taken up and further developed by Pico della Mirandola, and, especially, by the Franciscan friar, philosopher and poet, Giordano Bruno, who brought his teachings to England in 1583.

Spiritual alchemy, is based on the Hermetic principle 'As Above: So Below'. It seeks to break down the Base Matter of human nature in order to free it from its impurities and release the Divine Spark (the 'Gold') which is embodied in every human. It involves a continuous process of examination and reformation.

But in Bruno's time, which was also Shakespeare's time, to undertake alchemy in any form was dangerous. The changes produced by an alchemist in a laboratory seemed like magic; and the emphasis in spiritual alchemy on the ability of a human being to change their Divinely allotted place in life skirted very close to heresy, for which Bruno was burned at the stake in Rome in 1600. Alchemical texts, therefore, were written in code, using symbols, metaphor, story-telling, and, especially, poetry.

Iconic alchemical images represent progressive stages in the cyclical process of alchemical purification: The killing of the King (as in *Macbeth* for example) precedes the dissolution and putrefaction of the Base Matter into a black Crow-like chaos called 'the Nigredo'. There, the Toad spews out its poisons (Shakespeare's *Richard III* is repeated called a 'foul toad'). The dove of Divine spirit (the Gold) repeatedly flies from the flask

and is returned for further purification, until 'the Chemical Marriage' of purified, balanced, Male and Female essences is achieved – as in the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand, which in the masque in *The Tempest* gets Divine blessing. This alchemical marriage heralds a new and purer beginning, just as is foretold at the end of many of Shakespeare's plays.

In alchemy, the interaction of Body and Spirit (represented by Sulphur and Mercury) is essential in the repeated purifying process of dissolution and reformation, but there is also an essential secret ingredient, without which the 'Gold' cannot be achieved. In laboratory alchemy it is sometimes called 'Red Mercury' (Wikipedia offers a modern interpretation of Red Mercury). In spiritual alchemy the secret ingredient is Pure Unconditional Love.

A doctrine of Love, however, is easily open to misinterpretation, as Hughes showed in the ministrations of the changeling Reverend Lumb in *Gaudete*. And in our world, as Shakespeare vividly shows in his plays, love is distorted by religion, culture, power, lust and jealousy. It is this aspect of the plays, and the 'developing sequence' of Shakespeare's alchemical ritual, that shapes Hughes' poem, 'An Alchemy'.

For Hughes and, as he believed, for Shakespeare, the active alchemical agent, representing both Mercury and Sulphur in various forms, was the Goddess – Nature – with her universal creative and destructive powers. Especially, as she works within us through our emotions, ambitions, pretensions, deviance, failings, empathy and love. In Shakespeare's work, Hughes believed she was present in all her forms – Sacred Bride (Venus/Diana/Aphrodite), Divine Mother (Juno/Hera), and Hag (Hecate/Queen of Hell). And she is present in the many elemental and psychological tempests of Shakespeare's plays.

In the early part of Hughes' poem, he uses the vitriolic nature of Tamora from *Titus Andronicus* (Salt Tamora – the Goddess as Queen of Hell) to break down characters who distort and abuse Love. The Moor / Aaron, rapacious Tarquin, Puritan Icicle Angelo, power-hungry Richard III, and justice-and-ducat loving, Shylock, for example. And he ends that section with the release of a mourning dove – the dove of the Love Goddess Aphrodite.

Flittering dove

A detailed discussion of the first part of 'An Alchemy' is published on the 'Online First' webpages of *Intellect Discover Book 2.0* at

https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/btwo_00087_1

This early part of the poem constitutes the first stage of Hughes' alchemical work, but since Aphrodite's dove can only 'flitter', 'mourning' from the Base Matter in the alchemical flask, and is not a bird in firm and steady flight, the alchemical process of purification must continue.

The next alchemical steps take place in the lines from Ancestral her sourcery to Who

came again. These eleven lines are steeped in references to sorcery and herbal lore. They refer to the characters and plays in which, as Hughes outlines in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, the Goddess, in her triple aspects, is very clearly the active alchemical agent of change.

Our 'Ancestral' sorcerer and healer is the Goddess, Nature, and it is her herbal remedies that 'Helena the Healer', in *All's Well that Ends Well* has inherited from her father and uses to cure the King³.

Helena, who loves Bertram, regardless of his rejection of her and his lustful pursuits⁴, worships at the altar of 'Diana'⁵. She discusses chastity often in the play, and chastity, Hughes wrote later, 'signifies the dedicated spiritual aspect of "total unconditional love"' (SGCB 218). It is Bertram's impure Spirit which must be alchemically purged, just as must that of 'Angelo' in *Measure for Measure*, who rejects Mariana's unconditional love and flouts his own Puritanical laws. AndrogyneBoth are tricked, by their own lust and by the subterfuges of the women, who represent 'Diana, her owl side', into sleeping, under cover of darkness, with the constant, loving woman each had rejected and, thereby, uniting, Male and Female essences to create the alchemical androgyne, which represents 'spiritual (winged) potentiality'⁶.

It is the Goddess who provides the link, in Hughes' poem, between Angelo, 'Ophelia' and 'Othello', and it is 'Hamlet' and Othello on whom Hughes believed she works as the Queen of Hell.

Hamlet and Othello differ from Angelo in that both love the woman they reject. Hamlet's love for Ophelia and Othello's love for Desdemona is, as Hughes wrote in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* 'unconditional love'(SGCB 216, 228). Yet both are led to believe that a woman's love cannot be trusted.

The Ghost, with the information that Hamlet's mother has married his father's murderer (and Brother), presents his son with the double vision – the loved and the loathed woman within the one body of the mother.... Hamlet cannot separate Ophelia from his mother. He accuses her of possessing the same treacherous nature by virtue of being female.(SGCB 133–4).

Othello loves Desdemona and she him [but] Iago ... the emissary of Hell, pours his sexual cynicism into Othello's as-if-sleeping ear... with the sibylline handkerchief, Iago makes the double vision seem real... ..Othello rises mad with his purpose to kill Desdemona.(SGCB 228).

Both the Ghost and Iago are, in Hughes' analysis, cold, manipulative emissaries of the Queen of Hell.

However, it was not Angelo who 'walled up' Ophelia, as Hughes' linked lines might suggest. Ophelia is not 'walled up' in a nunnery, as Hamlet tells her to be; or by her brother's urging that she be wary of Hamlet's professions of love; and not by her father, who charges her to have nothing more to do with Hamlet; but metaphorically, she is

'walled up' by Nature from her distress over Hamlet's cruel rejection of her and from her grief for her father's death. As Laertes says,

Nature is fine in love; and where t'is fine
It sends some precious instance of itself
After the thing it loves. (Hamlet IV v 155–7)

After Polonius's hurried burial, Ophelia appears 'fantastically drest with Straws and Flowers'⁷. She sings of Hecate's world of death and the grave. And the flowers she gathers are Nature's medicinal herbs.

Even the unlearned among Shakespeare's audiences would have been familiar with herbal medicine and would have known the common folk-names and usages of at least some of Ophelia's flowers. Ophelia describes some of these: Rosemary 'that's for remembrance'; Rue, for regret, 'we may call it herb-grace o'Sundays'; and pansies (Heartsease) 'that's for thoughts' (IV v 68–77). Some of her flowers are specifically associated with the Goddess and with love: pansies and columbine (Granny's bonnet) are both sacred to Venus. Daisies (Bruiswort) were used by girls in the divinatory, petal-counting of 'He loves me: He loves me not' and were common in Mayday garlands. Fragile violets, like pansies, were used in love-spells and for healing; and Giant Fennel once made the thyrsus – the wands of the Dionysian bacchants. All these plants were, and still are, used in herbal medicine. Even nettles (Devil's claw) have long been used to help rheumatic pain (if you roll in them)⁸.

Willow, the branch of which broke and tipped Ophelia into the 'weeping brook', is Hecate's tree of enchantment, sorcery and witchcraft⁹. In the water, 'she chanted snatches of old tunes' and, as Gertrude says, lay 'like a creature native and indu'd / unto that element' before merging with water and earth in 'muddy death'. (IV vii 180–6). A fine alchemical 'dissolution' into the four elements: air (Ophelia's singing), fire (Hecate's witchy tree), earth and water.

'Willow Willow' is not one of Ophelia's songs. It is sung by Desdemona in Shakespeare's *Othello*, *The Moor of Venice*. And it was the Goddess, like the mourning dove earlier in Hughes' poem, who 'wept' for the death of these innocent women, and for the impurities of Love and Spirit which cause their deaths. In Shakespeare and the Goddess..., Hughes writes of the 'special pathos' of Ophelia's helplessness, which 'is inseparable from the cut and wilting flowers'; and he sees her role as being to 'register the human cost, the metaphysical cost to the soul (to the hero's own soul)' of rejecting Love (SGCB 239).

The same could be said of Desdemona's plight. She calls her willow song 'an old thing' sung by a forsaken maid, 'but it expresses her fortune / And she died singing it' (IV iii 28–9). So, too, does it express Desdemona's misfortune.

Othello is a hero who has, indeed 'lopped his rivals' both in war and in love, but The Queen of Hell reveals his imperfections. His military skills link him to 'Fortinbras', the son of the king of Norway who was killed by Hamlet's father in the battle for Denmark.

Young Fortinbras (whose name means 'strong-arm') has not 'lopped his rivals' but he is soldier – a man carrying a sword and 'steeled' for battle – and a man who will, as Hamlet says (perhaps ironically) 'find quarrel in a straw / when honour is at stake'(IV iv 51–3). In Hamlet, he completes Nature's uroboric circle of death and rebirth by taking back the Kingdom of Denmark which was originally taken from his father:

For me, with sorrow I embrace my fortune
I have some rights of memory in this kingdom,
Which now to claim my vantage doth invite me. (V ii 375–7)
Steel, however, is an amalgam of iron and carbon which also contains traces of other elements. It is not a pure metal – not alchemical 'Gold' – so, alchemically, it must still be tested and purified.

In Hamlet, the Goddess's herbal poisons kill many of the characters. 'Gertrude', however, throughout the play demonstrates unconditional love. She loved Hamlet's father: 'she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on' (I ii 143–5). She loves Hamlet's uncle unquestioningly until Hamlet tells her of his guilt. And she is a truly loving mother to Hamlet, even in his seeming madness. Her death is accidental and self-administered. So, as the Mother Goddess, she 'Came again' in Shakespeare's plays in different forms.

There is numerology here in these 11 lines, too: 10 (a complete cycle) + 1 (a new beginning). Nature's Uroborus eats its tail, and the alchemical process begins again.

Uroborus

For Hughes, as early as 1973, when this poem was first published, it was the Goddess, in all her forms, that he saw as the chief alchemical agent in Shakespeare's works. There, she is not just the 'Vitriol' – the dissolving 'Salt' of the first part of Hughes' poem, and the potent 'ancestral sorcerer', Nature, of the second, she is also the Androgyne which, for alchemists, embodies 'the two corresponding powers of the soul' and 'the two forces or poles of human nature (the Sulphur and Quicksilver [Mercury] of inward alchemical work)'¹⁰.

She 'came again' in the next lines of 'An Alchemy', 'rising' as the chaste 'Desdemona', the 'Sacred Bride', who, unlike her maid, Emilia, cannot believe any woman who truly loves her husband could 'abuse her husband in such gross kindv as to 'couch' with another man (IV iii 66). She is also Isabella, the (almost) 'Nun of Vienna' who, like Circe (who turned Ulysses' men into swine), uses Angelo's swinish nature to destroy him before redeeming him in his acceptance of Mariana – thus heralding the advent of the Love Goddess's 'ring-dove'.

She is also Hecate, the Moon Goddess, who in Shakespeare's plays causes the cosmic disturbances which are reflected in the madness and the mental disorders of his characters, and are spoken of frequently as omens portending chaos, such as the social upheaval and jealousy which pervade Caesar's world.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero's magic creates the tempest that brings Shakespeare's shipwrecked characters to the island where the Great Witch, Sycorax, rules. But when Sycorax's power is overcome and Miranda and Ferdinand are finally joined it becomes an island of love – 'Venus's Island'.

As 'the Blue Hag Hecate', the Goddess stirs the storm in which Macbeth first meets the three 'weird sisters'. Hughes describes them in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* as representing 'the Queen of Hell in her most virulent form' (SGCB 234). Shakespeare's Hecate, 'the close contriver of all harms' (III v 6), calls Macbeth 'a wayward son / Spiteful and wrathful; who, as others do, / Loves for his own ends' (III v 11–13), and it is her witches and Macbeth's equally diabolical wife who work on the doubleness in his nature to turn him from the 'noble' 'peerless kinsman' (I iv 58) of 'Saintly Duncan' into a Tarquinian murderer.

There is doubleness throughout *Macbeth*, where 'fair is foul and foul is fair' (I 11), and it is Macbeth's recognition of his own evil nature, the knowledge of his 'false heart' and of the evil he has done, that tips him into near-madness – to seeing 'daggers of the mind' – and ultimately destroys him:

It is the bloody business informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings; and wither'd murder,
Alarm'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his steady pace
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. (II i 50–6)

Alchemically, it is significant that rather than directly destroy Macbeth the Goddess deflects 'the dagger' to saintly Duncan in his 'Sanctum'. So, Macbeth's knowledge of his sins includes his own treasonous and sacrilegious murder of an anointed King. It is alchemically necessary, too, that the impure King must die and from his death a new King will be born. Macduff, who kills Macbeth, destroys the impure King, and by his death becomes the new, potentially purer King. Macduff was 'of no woman born' (V viii 36), and his caesarean birth – technically a virgin birth – links him, mythologically, to the Divine.

An early alchemical treatise translated by Janus Lacinius Theraput the Calabrian describes the stages of the alchemical process. It includes eight allegorical images in three of which the King is killed, the killer joins him in the grave, and from their bones a new King arises, 'full of the grace of God'¹¹:

Killing the King

This is the alchemical pattern of dissolution and recreation ('dissolve and coagulate') which is present in *Macbeth*, as it is, too, in *Richard III*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

Nor is it just in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that the 'crown's contagion' reflects the doubleness in human nature which alchemy must address. It is there, too, in the rivalries for the crown which pervade *King Lear*. Hughes' references to this play end this section of the poem with mention of 'Gloucester', 'Cordelia' and 'Lear', but the linked lines 'Cordelia guiding / Blinded Gloucester' seem problematic.

In *King Lear*, it is not Cordelia who guides the blinded Gloucester, but first an old man, then Gloucester's banished, illegitimate son, Edgar.

Gloucester's blinding is an extreme example of the terrible results of double nature in many of the characters in *King Lear*. It is also a metaphor for Lear's own blindness in the way he values his sons: 'I stumbled when I saw' he tells the old man, recognising Edgar's betrayal of him. It is almost immediately after Lear meets Gloucester, recognises his voice and learns of his blindness, that, mixing 'Reason in madness', he describes himself as 'cut to the brains'(IV vi 72, 192), which in 'An Alchemy', becomes 'Cutting to the brain'.

Cordelia, as the exemplar of unconditional love, could be seen as a guide for those watching or reading *King Lear*; but the simple phrase, 'Cordelia guiding', belies the importance Hughes attached to Cordelia in Shakespeare's alchemy. Hughes explained this in detail in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, the original title for which was 'The Silence of Cordelia', because, as he wrote to Keith Sagar: 'Cordelia's silence. The key to the whole complex'¹².

In that work, Hughes wrote that 'Shakespeare always presents as the natural path towards the heart's truth, that 'matter of the heart' which will finally reject words'(SGCB 278); and Cordelia fails to find words to express her love for Lear, because 'Nothing can pretend to express the truth'(SGCB 277). 'Ordinary words' he wrote 'are inherently false but can encompass the truth in their fashion'... 'glanced at crookedly, as by the Fool in *King Lear*'(SGCB 278).

It is the Fool who points out Lear's errors of judgment, telling him soon after his division of the crown: 'thou had'st little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden one away'(I iv 157-8). And Lear's 'under-crown lightning' – his madness – begins when both Regan and Goneril drive him away.

The most powerful dissolution in this section of 'An Alchemy', and in Shakespeare's play, is the madness of Lear, caused by his own misinterpretations of love, his rejection of Cordelia's 'unconditional love', and by his obstinacy and pride. Hughes places the blame firmly on the Goddess in her retributive form as 'The Boar', something he only explains fully in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. It is she who alchemically dissolves and re-constitutes Lear. The storm is hers: 'The lightnings are heavenly fires and suffering of rejected Divine Love, alias the rage of the Boar'(SGCB 274); and Lear's madness – 'the charge of the Boar' – is, 'a psychological event, a shock wave of death-rebirth'(SGCB 383). Her presence as Nightmare, with her 'nine-fold' minions, is attested to in the play by Edgar in his disguise as Poor Tom

where he invokes Saint Swithin to banish her¹³:

Saint Withhold footed thrice the 'old;
He met the night-mare and her nine-fold;
Bid her alight,
And her troth plight,
And, aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!br /> (III iv 115–9)

In Hughes' poem, it is 'The Boar's Moons' that are 'mangling' Lear's 'sainted flesh' ('sainted' because he is an anointed King). In Shakespeare's play, Gloucester refers to the evil portent of 'the late eclipses of the sun and moon' (I ii 97); references to devils and fiends abound; and it is the Goddess's poisonous herbs – 'Darnel, and all the idle weeds that grow / In our sustaining corn' (IV iv 5) that Lear is seen wearing before Cordelia finally meets him again.

Cordelia, for Hughes, demonstrates 'total, unconditional love', and she does, in the end, guide her father to an understanding of what Love truly is. Once they are re-united, his 'great rage' is 'kill'd in him' and he becomes like a child again and begs her forgiveness:

We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness:
(V ii 79; V iii 10–12)

At the end of Shakespeare's play, both die and a new order is established; but in 'An Alchemy' Hughes ends this section of his poem with the single line 'Lear Furens' – Lear Raging.

Nigredo

The next eleven lines of Hughes' poem form another complete alchemically cycle, dissolving Lear's rage in an alchemical process in which he enters the Nigredo, the dissolution in Raven-like darkness.

He has 'plucked out' his 'dog-hearted daughters', 'Regan'... and 'boarish' 'Goneril' (IV iii 45; III vii 57). He has rejected the daughter he 'loved most', because she 'could not heave [her] heart into her mouth' (I i 89–90), so she who had been 'his Joy' 'vanished', until they are re-united and he recognises the truth worth of her love.

Ring dove

At this point in Shakespeare's play, she dies, but the 'warm body' in Lear's arms, in the linked lines of Hughes' poem – becomes, alchemically, the warm body of the 'Rock-dove of Aphrodite', Goddess of Love – thus completing another alchemical cycle of death and rebirth. So, yet again, the alchemical bird of the Sprit flies from the darkness. It leaves 'a feather only', but this is a symbol of hope, and also a sign that more alchemical work still needs to be done.

A single line follows, which, although isolated by the pattern in which the lines before and after it are grouped, links Aphrodite's feather – the germ of alchemical 'Gold' – first

to 'Timon', then to 'Coriolanus', and then to others in the fifteen lies which follow it. In *Shakespeare and the Goddess*, Hughes brings together Shakespeare's Timon of Athens, Coriolanus and Antony and Cleopatra, as he does in 'An Alchemy', calling them 'the drama of a period of transitions' in which the 'Gnostic redemption of the hero and heroine together' is foreshadowed (SGCB 283).

This alchemical 'marriage' of the male and female elements (the 'King' and 'Queen') of the increasingly purified Base Matter is a necessary stage in the alchemical work.

King and Queen

For Timon, in *Timon of Athens*, this is not possible. There is no female heroine in the play and Timon's 'unconditional love' is for Athens and its citizens, until the treachery of those he had believed to be his friends enrages him and he abandons Athens to exist in a cave in the woods.

Hughes called Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* 'a vision of the meaningless absurd appetites of despiritualized mankind' (SGCB 288). Timon, whose 'need for social love of his friends' induced him to lavish his gold (his money and, metaphorically, his Soul) on them, has no 'spiritual passion' – nothing the alchemical art can work on. His reliance on nature to support him in his cave does not redeem him, instead, he gives the gold he finds there to General Alcibiades to make war on Athens and its people, with the words 'There's more gold: – / Do you damn others and let it damn you / And ditches grave you all' (IV iii 65). So, Aphrodite's feather, like Timon himself (as the linkage of lines in 'An Alchemy' suggests), is 'damned with gold'.

However, Shakespeare ends his play with recognition not only of Timon's 'soul bereft' 'latter spirits' but also with a note of hope. Timon's death, 'entomb'd upon the very hem of the sea' returns him, alchemically, to the mother waters of the alembic; and there is hope, too, in Alcibiades' change-of-heart and his vow to 'Make war breed peace; make peace stint war, make each / Prescribe to other, as each other's leech' (V iv 80–1).

Coriolanus, like Timon, focuses his love on a city (Rome) and its people until they reject him. He, too, turns violently against his former love but, as Hughes wrote in *Shakespeare and the Goddess*... : 'Coriolanus's Rome contains the essential nucleus that Timon's Athens lacked: the female embodiment of the hero's soul and love': his wife, Virgilia, and his mother, Volumnia (SGCB 293). These women embody the female essence of alchemy and represent 'unconditional love'. It is their love which stems Coriolanus's rage and rouses enough love in him to turn him from his intended destruction of Rome. So, love brings a meeting between the female and male parts of Coriolanus' own nature, and, although he dies, the germ of alchemical 'Gold' that 'carried Coriolanus' to this condition remains.

The next fourteen lines of this poem are difficult to interpret. Much later, when Hughes wrote his 'Introduction' to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he was aware that, 'for anyone who does not know the plays rather well... the whirl of names will sound like a betting shop in a basement of the Tower of Babel' (SGCB 35). There is

a similar danger in 'An Alchemy', and, without recourse to the close examination of the plays that Hughes offered in Shakespeare and the Goddess..., it is hard to make sense of some of the lines in this poem. Hughes' focus in Shakespeare and the Goddess... was on the themes of the Tragic Equation and The Rival Brothers, which he saw as a developing pattern in Shakespeare's work. He also believed that Shakespeare's ultimate goal was to create balance and harmony in his characters and, through the 'idea of drama as a ritual for manipulating the soul'(SGCB 33), in his audience. This, too, is Hughes' goal in 'An Alchemy'.

Peacocks Tail

In this section of the poem, now that the cyclical repetition of 'dissolve and coagulate' is almost complete, Hughes brings together the feathers of hope that will form the alchemical Peacock's Tail, the colours of which are 'an emblem of the Great Work'¹⁴ signalling the near-achievement of the pure spiritual 'Gold'.

And it is Aphrodite/Venus, Goddess of Love, who governs the alchemical stage in which the Peacock's Tail appears. In the richly illustrated 16th Century alchemical treatise, *Splendor Solis*¹⁵, she rides in a golden chariot drawn by two doves, above the alchemical flask where the Peacock spreads its magnificent tail, and the flask is surrounded by loving couples in a verdant landscape¹⁶.

In the linked lines of Hughes' poem, he now collects a feather of 'gold' which has been 'crushed from Caesar'. Julius Caesar is not one of the plays Hughes deals with in Shakespeare and the Goddess..., but in that play Caesar's nature seems fairly balanced: his love for his wife is clear, so too is his care for the Republic and for the people of Rome. Unlike Timon and Coriolanus he does not reject one for the other. He is killed by the conspirators, but his spirit remains intact. Before his assassination, Brutus urged care:

O! that we could come by Caesar's spirit,
And not dismember Caesar!
Let's be sacrificers but not butchers...
(II i 166–70)
And after the deed was done:

O Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet!
Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords
In our own proper entrails.
(V iii 94–6)
So, the 'Gold' of Caesar's spirit, freed from bodily impurities, can be added to the Peacock's plumes.

Another feather is gathered from Antony and Cleopatra. Cleopatra is the 'Old Nile Serpent'. Longing for Antony when he is away in Rome, she imagines him missing her: 'He's speaking now, / Or murmuring, 'Where's my serpent of the Nile' / For so he calls me.'(I v 30). And she presents herself as the goddess, Isis, who is the tutelary god of

her Egyptian realm, frequently called on by Shakespeare's characters throughout the play. In Shakespeare and the Goddess... Hughes describes Cleopatra as 'the avatar of Isis, as she presents herself and is understood to be'(SGCB 315) (cf.III vi 20–3). In all her 'infinite variety'(II ii 277), she incorporates all aspects of 'Moon-browed Isis / Bride and Mother' – and also, in the eyes of the Romans, she is Queen of Hell – 'Salt Cleopatra'(II i 26), a gypsy and a witch.

For Hughes, Antony and Cleopatra marked an important step in Shakespeare's work. In it, Antony and Cleopatra 'exist in a divine world in which the Goddess and her consort are united'(SGCB 301). Shakespeare 'painfully destroys the Puritan ego' which is Antony's rational Roman character, 'and unites both hero and Female on the transcendental plane of Divine Love'(SGCB 299). Antony 'renounces his claim to any part of the tragic world of the Roman power struggles'(SGCB 308), and he accepts 'all the failings (betrayals etc.) of the human Cleopatra... loves her, in spite of everything, with 'total unconditional love'”(SGCB 314).

Regardless of this union of Male and Female essences in the love of Antony and Cleopatra, there is no harmony in their world, nor can they achieve that. So, the alchemical process is still incomplete and, although a feather of hope may have been gathered, Antony and Cleopatra die. Thus, their essences are returned to the alchemical 'egg' to become, again, for Hughes and (as he believed) for Shakespeare, just one more step towards the final achievement of the alchemical 'Gold'.

The next line of 'An Alchemy' is difficult to interpret. Neither Antony nor Cleopatra were 'Mourning a Rome'. Antony had given up his Roman self in his love of Cleopatra. He dies honourably, by suicide, 'a Roman, by a Roman / Valiantly Vanquished' (IV xv 60), but his concern even as he dies is for Cleopatra, not for Rome. Cleopatra, who is grief stricken, mourns Antony as 'Noblest of men', 'Husband'¹⁷, but she does not mourn 'a Rome'.

So, is it Isis / Aphrodite who is 'Mourning a Rome'? Both are linked to this phrase by the unpunctuated lines of the poem and, alchemically, this would make sense. Julius Caesar's Roman Republic died after his death. War and chaos ensued, as is clear in Antony and Cleopatra, and the chance of a Rome of balance and harmony was lost.

In the next line of Hughes' poem, 'Leontes banished' may refer to Leontes in A Winter's Tale, where harmony is restored at the end of the play, but it is Leontes Posthumus in Cymbeline who is banished 'to Italy (i.e. back to Rome)'(SGCB 336) after marrying the British king's daughter, Imogen, without the king's consent.

In Cymbeline, Hughes saw reflections of the religious dissociation of England from Catholic Rome which was still the cause of persecution and death in Shakespeare's world¹⁸. He suggested that Shakespeare's reuniting of Imogen and Leontes Posthumus, 'beyond their hope, and, as if beyond death', represents the re-establishment of balance and harmony – a new reign of the 'understanding of the heart'(SGCB 339), and a new version, for Shakespeare, of the expression of

Aphrodite's total and unconditional love. In this play, too, Hughes suggested that 'the drama can be read as the alchemical transformation of a single soul' – a 'purgation and remaking' – which 'can be read as the sin and redemption of Posthumus'(SGCB 340).

The sudden reappearance of Lear in the poem as 'Lear redivivus', harks back to Lear's rebirth and transformation when he rises phoenix-like from the tempests (literal and psychological) and is reunited with Cordelia, at which point, as Hughes wrote in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, Shakespeare showed Lear's 'true self reborn – reunited with his beloved who is also reborn'(SGCB 323). So, Lear and Posthumus, both re-made and reborn, add to the feathers in the alchemical Peacock's Tail.

For Hughes, the full display of the Peacock's Tail culminated in *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, when Aphrodite literally 'found breath in Marina'.

The virtuous Pericles, believing his chaste wife Thaisa to have died in childbirth while they are on his ship bound for Tyre, is forced by superstitious sailors to cast her body overboard in a chest. Thaisa is found and revived by the skills of Cerimon, a Lord of Ephesus, and enters the temple of Diana there as a votaress. Pericles leaves his new-born daughter, Marina, in the care of Cleon, Governor of Tharsus, but Cleon's wife becomes jealous of her and arranges for her to be murdered. To avoid suspicion, Cleon and his wife arrange for a statue of Marina to be erected mourning her death and claiming that she had 'withered in her spring of year'(IV iv 36). Marina, however, survives the attempted murder but is captured by pirates who sell her to a brothel, where, much to the dismay of the brothel owners, her prayers to Diana help her not only to retain her virginity but also to find the words to persuade brothel customers to abandon their dishonourable ways.

Marina, who has retained her strength and purity, and whose 'breath' is used in the art of persuasion, has prevailed over seemingly impossible odds. She is ultimately reunited with Pericles and Thaisa, both of whom have demonstrated their own pure souls in the play. Unlike other plays, all remain alive, and Pericles, for Hughes was one of the plays in which 'the denouement is idealized, transcendent and lifted into a music that does seem unearthly'(SGCB 331).

'Redeemed', in the next line of the poem, is a carefully chosen word. Its meaning encompasses the worldly and the spiritual. Marina redeemed the brothel customers by turning them away from sin. Aphrodite redeemed the fragments of pure love that existed in the souls of those chosen by Shakespeare as characters in his plays, where, as Hughes believed, Shakespeare changed and re-made (brought redemption to) his audience through the rituals of his drama. The alchemist redeems all these fragments in the process of creating the Peacock's Tail; and the alchemical Peacock spreads its valuable tail-feathers to make a spectacular display before discarding them into the flask to precipitate the final redemption of the alchemical process.

George Ripley, in his 15th century alchemical scroll, identified the Peacock as 'The Bird of Hermes' and showed it shedding its feathers, a process he described as 'eating'

them, in order to unite White (Queen/ Female essence) and Red (King/Male essence) and create the Philosophers' Stone (the 'Gold') of spiritual rebirth¹⁹:

The Bird of Hermes is my name
Eating my wings to make me tame.

In the Sea withouten leese
Standeth the Bird of Hermes:
Eating his Wings variable,
And thereby maketh himself more stable;
When all his Fethers be agon,
He standeth still there as a stone;
Here is now both White and Red,
And also the Stone to quicken the dead.

Hughes' line 'Redeemed all Tempests', however, requires the elucidation of the meaning of Shakespeare's tempests that he provided in Shakespeare and the Goddess... . There, he discussed 'the storm' as 'evolved through the action' of Shakespeare's plays (SGCB 382), and having not just a dramatic function but being also a worldly reflection of the Goddess's anger and (as in King Lear) a physical manifestation of the psychological 'shock-wave of death-rebirth'(SGCB 383).

Marina not only adds the final plume to the Peacock's Tail, she also draws together, through the unpunctuated lines of Hughes' poem, the feathers of 'Gold' Shakespeare found in the souls of Timon, Coriolanus, Caesar, Antony, Cleopatra, Lear, Leontes, and Posthumus. The spiritual/psychological deaths and rebirths of these characters redeem all tempests – assuaging the Goddess's anger and healing each one who has redeemed his or her soul.

The storm in Shakespeare's final play, The Tempest, is different. It is summoned by the magician, Prospero, who controls all four elements – Air (Ariel), Earth (Caliban), Fire and Water (the lightning, thunder and rain of the storm). Before dealing with The Tempest, however, Hughes, in 'An Alchemy', brought together the Phoenix and the Turtle, the two creatures which in Shakespeare's poem of that title represent pure, unconditional love²⁰.

Shakespeare's poem was first published in 1601 among other 'Diverse poetickall essaies on the former subject; viz: the Turtle and Phoenix. Done by the best and chiefest of our modern writers', which supplemented Robert Chester's 'Loves Martyr, or, Rosalins Complaint. Allegorically shadowing the truth of Love'²¹. Shakespeare's poem is an 'anthem' for the death of these two creatures which, in Chester's poem, are united in a pure Platonic love and die together so that the Phoenix may be reborn. As Shakespeare described them:

So they loved, as love in twain
Had the essence but in one;
Two distincts, Division none;

Number there in love was slaine.

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;
Distance, and no space was seene
Twixt this Turtle and his Queene
But in them it were a wonder.
(lines 25–32)

Perhaps it was the Phoenix as the Bird of Hermes to which Hughes referred when he wrote that 'His Kiss of Life / Stirred the Turtle'; or it could have been Shakespeare himself, whose alchemy Hughes was tracing here.

In any case, Hughes changed the gender of each of these lovers. His Phoenix, in 'An Alchemy', becomes male, like that of George Ripley, and his turtle (which is a male turtle–dove in Chester's poem and in Shakespeare's) becomes Aphrodite's turtle–dove, which first shed its feather into this section of his poem. Aphrodite is the moon goddess whose powers control the cycles of menstruation. In 'An Alchemy', her dove now becomes the 'Turtle / Of the waters of amnios' – immersed in the amniotic fluid that surrounds the developing foetus in 'The lunar cauldron' of the alembic womb.

The next five lines of 'An Alchemy' remove the Queen of Hell in her darkest forms from 'the Tree': 'black Venus / double tongued' in her power to inspire love and to destroy her lovers, as in Venus and Adonis; the 'swine uddered', 'foul witch' 'Sycorax'²², who is mother of Caliban in *The Tempest*; and 'Lilith the night–crow', the Hebrew owl–goddess, banished first wife of Adam, seducer of men and stealer of children, who is also the screech–owl – 'The shrieking harbinger / Foul precursor of the fiend' (5–6) who is banned from the mourning ceremony in Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle*.

All these 'Slid from the Tree' which, in alchemy, is 'The Tree of Diana' (Aphrodite), the 'Philosopher's Tree', a pure, moon–white, crystalline growth which fills the flask and signals the near completion of the alchemist's Great Work.

Next, in another reference to *The Tempest*, 'the Rainbow / Breasted dove' is released with 'a leaf of light', and linked to Prospero's virginal daughter, Miranda, who falls instantly in love with Ferdinand, the first man she has ever seen who is not her father or the monstrous Caliban. At first, she thinks Ferdinand is 'a spirit' (I ii 488), which seems like 'a thing divine' (I ii 498), or, in Hughes's words, an 'Adam / Adonis'; and Ferdinand thinks she is 'most sure the goddess / On whom these airs attend' (I ii 505). The 'miracle', may be intended to refer to Miranda's meeting with Ferdinand or to the appearance of the benign, Heavenly goddesses who are summoned by Prospero in Shakespeare's *Masque*: or to both. Hughes, in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, wrote of the reaction of the young couple as mutual 'love at first sight' which 'becomes mutual adoration and promise of eternal love' (SGCB 437); and he described their first words to each other as 'exchanges taking place on the transcendental plane' (SGCB 415). He called the *Masque*, which unites the Heavenly and the Earth–bound, an 'alchemical vision' (SGCB 444), 'The sacred nuptial ceremony' (SGCB 441), and 'an incantatory magic spell, a Hermetic ritual in the active mode' (SGCB 442).

The Masque in *The Tempest* brings together Juno, 'the queen o' th' sky' (whose 'peacock's fly amain' as she approaches); Iris, who calls herself Juno's 'watery arch and messenger'; and 'rich Ceres', 'Bounteous lady' Earth–Mother and goddess of fertility. Juno bids them join her to

Bless this twain, that they may prosperous be
And honoured in their issue
(IV i 57–72).

In 'An Alchemy' Hughes placed Iris's rainbow on the breast of one of Venus/Aphrodite's doves, which, in the Masque, Juno describes as drawing Venus's chariot across the sky after he son, Cupid, has worked 'some wanton charm upon this man and maid' (IV i 101).

Hughes' alchemy, here, was different to that of Shakespeare but for both the blessing of the chaste union of Miranda and Ferdinand by the gods was necessary for the creation of the new, harmonious world which Prospero sought to create. The chastity, too, which Prospero imposed on them until they all return to Naples and 'see the nuptial \ Of these dear–beloved solemnized' (V 367), ensures that the alchemical 'Gold' of their union is free from bodily impurities.

Dianas Tree

A woodcut from the alchemical text *Uraltes Chymische Werke*, attributed to Abraham Eliazar, 1735, illustrates the union which Hughes and Shakespeare describe. A double Uroborus forming a completed circle in front of Diana's Tree is titled, 'Unite Them', and shows the union of the Universal Divine Spirit (the winged snake), with the Earth–bound prima materia (humankind)²³.

In *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, Hughes wrote that *The Tempest* 'gives the impression of being the final product of a long alchemical labour' (SGCB 447)²⁴. He went on to develop a complex (and questionable) myth–based explanation for the rebirth which traditionally follows the creation of the 'Gold' (the 'Philosopher's Stone') that he believed happened with 'the alchemical marriage' (SGCB 451) of Miranda and Ferdinand. Shakespeare, however, allows Prospero to postpone the actual marriage until after the play has ended and all but he have returned to Naples. Before this occurs, Prospero will 'abjure' the 'rough magic' he has been performing; chase away 'the ignorant fumes that mantle' the 'pure reason' of those who had plotted to kill him; pardon all who had conspired against him, including Caliban; and free Ariel. Then, he vows,

I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the Earth,
And deeper than ever did plummet sound
I'll drown my book.v (V i 60–6).

In 'An Alchemy', Hughes, too, avoids the rebirth. Instead, in lines that step down the page, to mimic the action he describes, he returns everything to the alchemical 'crucible'

of 'Tiamat', the most ancient scaly monster of the waters of Chaos from whom, in Babylonian myth, our world was created:

The Mother

The Scales

The Coil

Of the Matter

And he sinks it 'With Prospero's bones / And the sounding Book', into her fathomless deeps.

Prospero, in his final speeches, anticipates his own death, having given up his magic:

'What strength I have's my own / Which is most faint'
(V 3–4).

'I will retire me to my Milan,
Where every third thought shall be my grave'
(V 68–9.)

Borrowing the nautical imagery of depth–sounding, used so precisely by Shakespeare in Prospero's speech, Hughes' final lines suggest that Shakespeare, as that 'the supreme alchemist Prospero/, Shakespeare'(SGCB 431), shares this ending, and that the 'sounding Book' may well be Shakespeare's own works, in which he plumbed the depths of alchemy.

Hughes' poem, 'An Alchemy', is a remarkable work but its complexities make it impossible to understand unless the reader has as broad an understanding of Shakespeare's works as Hughes did. Nor does it comply with what Hughes called the simple, direct, honest speech, which he later admired in the vacanas of the Siva–worshipping mystics of Southern Indian²⁵. Rather, it is as he described Shakespeare's language to Ekbert Faas– 'full of knotted up complexities and piled up obscurities' which are, in fact, 'utterly direct and utterly simple' that by 'hitting one nail on the head it makes fifty others jump in of their own accord'²⁶.

For Hughes and Shakespeare, and for alchemists like George Ripley, Abraham Eliazar and others how wrote and sometimes illustrated their alchemical texts, their alchemy was performed through the ritual manipulation of words, images, symbols and, above all, poetry. But alchemical texts, full as they usually are of paradoxes, riddles and allegories, are notoriously difficult to interpret and are often described as a labyrinth.

16th century alchemist, doctor and philosopher, Paracelsus, seemed to suggest the difficulties when he subtitled his *Coelum Philosophorum* (The Book of Vexations), although he may have been referring to the chemical disturbances brought to the *prima materia* in an alchemist's laboratory. Artepheus, a 12th century philosopher puts the

warning more clearly²⁷:

He that takes the words of the hermetic philosophers literally, he even already, having lost the thread of Ariadne, wanders in the midst of the labyrinth, multiplies errors, and casts away his money for naught.

Hughes' poem, 'An Alchemy', fits well into this labyrinthine pattern but it is not an alchemical text outlining a method of obtaining gold. Instead it charts the alchemy process he discerned in of Shakespeare's work, and, at the same time, it embodies Hughes' own poetic ritual of alchemical transmutation.

Addendum: Shakespeare, Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism and Alchemy.

In his 'Introduction' in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes wrote of 'the pervasive influence' of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism on 'the intellectual life of England' at the time when Shakespeare was creating his poetry and plays, and he 'picked out' what he believed to be 'the salient features of the movement as it which came within the orbit of Shakespeare's known social and political world.' and as it 'can be seen to relate to his imaginative life'(SGCB 18–19).

To do this, he relied strongly on the work of Dame Frances Yates, who, in her book, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, wrote that 'the occult philosophy of the Elizabethan age was no minor concern of a few adepts. It was the main philosophy of the age, stemming from John Dee and his movement'²⁸.

Yates traced the development of Occult Neoplatonism and Christian Cabbala from its origins to the high point of its influence in Renaissance Italy, and from there to its influence in Elizabethan and Jamesian England, where it initially flourished but later became associated in the popular mind with dark magic, trickery, witches and ghosts.

Fundamental to the transmission of this learning from Italy to England, were Giordano Bruno, John Dee and the eldest son of the Earl of Pembroke, Sir Philip Sidney.

Bruno, was an Italian Dominican Friar whose poetic re-interpretation of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism and Hebrew Cabbala in Christian terms taught that we and the world are a reflection of the Divine, as in the Hermetic principle 'As above So below'. Since, 'All is One', we are able, by the use of memory techniques and imagination, to cleanse our souls and rise from the darkness of the world to the Divine Source. In 1583, whilst in England, Bruno presented three notoriously badly received lectures to doctors of philosophy at Oxford University, which focussed on Copernican theory in the context of the astral magic of the Neoplatonic Hermeticist, Marsilio Ficino²⁹. He published a number of books based on hermetic philosophy and morality, including the series of mystical love poems, *De gli Eroici Furori* (On the Heroic Frenzies), which he dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney, with whom he had become close. This dedication includes extensive notes about the furor of passionate love, and the power of Mystical Love to

make the soul divine and heroic.

Sidney's own closely argued essay, 'In Defence of Poesie', links true poetry (that made by Poets (not 'versifiers that neede never aunswere to the name of Poets'³⁰) to Platonic 'divine frenzy', and 'Planet-like Music'³¹. Poetry, he wrote, through the alchemy of inspiration, memory and imagination can 'hold children from play, and old men from the chimney corner. And pretending no more, doth intende the winning of the mind from wickedness to virtue'³². He and his circle of friends which included the poets Gabriel Harvey, Edward Dyer and Edmund Spencer, were studying the works of John Dee, and they had dedicated themselves to the reformation of English poetry³³. They called their group, 'The Areopagus', after the aristocratic Athenian council in Ancient Greece³⁴.

It is believed, and it is very likely, that Bruno also met Dr John Dee, who was Sidney's tutor and patron. Dee was a brilliant and learned mathematician and astronomer who became astrologer-in-chief to Queen Elizabeth I³⁵. He was also a practicing cabbalist and, through his 'medium', Edmund Kelly, he consulted angelic guides who dictated to him the work which he published as *Monas Heiroglyphica*. This highly symbolic and difficult text would, he claimed, revealed the secret mysteries of nature and would revolutionise current knowledge.

Sidney's younger sister, Mary, Countess of Pembroke, was also very influential. She was a respected poet, and, as John Aubrey wrote of her – 'She was the greatest patronesse of witt and learning of any lady in her time. She was a great chymist and spent yearly a great deale in that study. She kept for her laborator in the house Adrian Gilbert (vulgarly called Dr. Gilbert), halfe brother to Sir Walter Raleigh, who was a great chymist in those dayes'³⁶. Most importantly, she founded a literary group known as 'The Wilton Circle' which met regularly at her home, Wilton House. A number of prominent poets benefited from meetings with this group and from her patronage, including Edmund Spencer (who dedicated his poem, 'The Ruins of Time' to her and addressed a sonnet to her which he prefixed to *The Faerie Queen*), Gabriel Harvey, Samuel Daniel, Michael Drayton, John Aubrey and Ben Jonson. Through these poets, and particularly through the work of Spencer and Jonson, the philosophies of Neoplatonism and the art and magic of Alchemy became widely known, not just among the literati but to the English people in general.

Spencer's Hymnes, which 'abound in references to Plato and to Platonic philosophy'³⁷, express the Platonic and Cabbalistic importance of transformative Love. This and the Platonic and Cabbalistic ideas which fostered creativity in the Italian Renaissance – ideas of universal harmony and the Hermetic/alchemical transmission of divine emanations to our world through planetary influence – is fundamental in his poem, *The Faerie Queen*, which was widely read in England. Alchemy, as an alleged means of transforming lead into gold in a laboratory, was familiar to most people, and Christopher Marlow drew on it in this debased form to create *Doctor Faustus*. Ben Jonson also made fun of it in his popular play, *The Alchemist*.

The spiritual purpose of Alchemy, which like that of Christian Cabbala works to purify

and transform the Spirit of human individuals, was less widely known but was very familiar to the poets of the Areopagus and the Wilton Circle. Sir Henry Herbert, Earl of Pembroke, was the husband of Mary Sidney. He shared Mary's interest in the arts, and in 1591 he became the patron of a group of actors and playwrights known as 'The Earl Of Pembroke's Men'. Between 1591 and 1593, William Shakespeare was a member of this group and among the plays performed by them were several of his works. When the London theatres closed due to plague, Pembroke's Men toured the country, but, as Peter Ackroyd notes: '[they] were not simply a group of travelling players. They were invited to perform before the queen during the Christmas season, a signal honour for a group so recently established'³⁸.

In London's relatively small circle of aristocratic patrons, intellectuals, poets, playwrights and actors, William Shakespeare, as Stephen Greenblatt and Peter Ackroyd have both shown in their biographies, knew, lived, and often worked closely alongside many of these men. He was also, as Frances Yates has shown, and as Ted Hughes attests in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, very familiar with the theory and practice of all the occult arts.

Yates wrote that 'Though Shakespeare never wielded a wand, nor thought of himself as a magus, he is a magician, master of the spell-binding use of words and poetry as magic. This was an art in which he was supreme'³⁹.

Shakespeare's wand was his pen, and Hughes and many other writers have divined occult purpose in his poems and plays. For Hughes, Shakespeare's whole opus had an overall alchemical and cabbalistic pattern, and in his own poem, 'An Alchemy', he created an alchemical text which he structured to demonstrate this.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. The name of Helena's father, Gerard de Narbon, would have reminded many in Shakespeare's audience of the popular *Herbal* published in 1597 by John Gerard.
2. 'I give / Me and my service, ever whilst I live / Into your guidance' (III 99–101).
3. 'Now Dian, from thy altar do I fly / And to imperial Love, that god most high / Do my sighs stream' (III 71–3).
4. Jung, C.G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, Princeton University Press, 1952, p. 202.
5. This stage direction occurs in the 1790 Nicholas Rowe edition. Rowe depended on the 4th Folio (1685) but, being an actor, he added some helpful stage directions.
6. There is much scholarly debate about the identity of the 'long purples, / That liberal shepherds give a grosser name / But our cold maids do dead man's fingers call them'.(IV vii 193–5). The most likely plant is *Orchis mascula*, an early flowering common

orchid with long spikes of purple flowers, sometimes called 'Dog's bollocks' or 'Fool's bollocks', because of the shape of the buds. Its root is two testicle-sized white tubers with fine white rootlets, and it has long been used as a medicine for fertility and for sexual disorders.

(<http://www.sussexflora.org.uk/2020/04/orchis-mascula-early-purple-orchid>).

7. Circe had a riverside cemetery planted with willows and dedicated to Hecate. Willow trees frequently overhang water-courses and are commonly called 'weeping willows'. The medicinal ingredient in the bark of the tree, acetylsalicylic acid, is the active ingredient in the anti-inflammatory pain-killer, Aspirin.

8. Burckhardt, T. *Alchemy*, Alement Books, 1987. pp. 149–51.

9. The full version of *A Form and Method of Perfecting Bases Metals* by Janus Lacinius Therapus the Calabrian, which is thought to be a copy of an originally treatise by 14th century alchemist Petrus Bonus, can be found of the Alchemy Website at https://www.alchemywebsite.com/petrus_bonus.html.

10. Sagar, K. (ed.) *The Letters of Ted Hughes & Keith Sagar*, The British Library, 2102, pp.10, 181, 212.

11. Saint Withhol is Saint Swithin, an Anglo-Saxon saint whose association with meteorological disturbances is still part of local folk-superstitions: if it rains of Saint Swithin's day it is said that it will continue to rain for 40 days.

12. White, A.E. (ed) *The Hermetic Museum Vol II*, 'An Open Entrance to the Palace of the King, by an anonymous sage and lover of the truth', 1893, p.194.

13. *Splendor Solis* is attributed to Salomon Trismosin (probably a pseudonym). Images from an 1582 manuscript can be seen on the British Library webpage at <https://www.bl.uk/a-history-of-magic/collection-items/splendor-solis>. A full version with larger images is available at <http://www.chymist.com/Splendor%20solis.pdf>.

14. This image is in the public domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Splendor_Solis:Kupferstichkabinett Berlin.

15. *Antony and Cleopatra*: (IV xv 69) ; 'Husband, I come. / Now to that name my courage prove my title' (V ii 335).

16. In his 'Note' to *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, Hughes wrote of the effects of the 'historical forces' – the 'national trauma' – of the suppression of 'the old Catholic and the new Puritan' which he believed influenced Shakespeare's life and his work. (pp.165–6). He expanded on this in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* (pp.74–78). Using alchemical symbolism, he wrote that 'Since Shakespeare was born, lived and died within the crucible, his art evolved as a kind of salamander. It had time to develop the means to thrive and to deal with the conditions and forces that shaped him'(p.78).

17. Ashmole, Elias (ed.) *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*, 1562. 'Verses Belonging to an Emblematic Scrowle: Supposed to be invented by Geo: Ripley'. (p.376). A digital reproduction is available on the Internet Archive website at <https://archive.org>.
18. Hughes chose, 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' as the final poem for *A Choice Shakespeare's Verse*, Faber, 1971 pp.161–163.
19. A digitised version of this book, including Shakespeare's 'essaie' (pp.182–4), can be found on the Internet Archive website at <https://archive.org>.
20. *The Tempest* (l ii 308). In *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*, Hughes wrote of Sycorax as 'the African witch Sycorax (swine–crow)' (SGCB 471). Robert Graves, in *The White Goddess*, p.123., called her 'Pig Raven'.
21. Skea, A. Image drawn from Eliazar, *Utrales Chymische Werke* – various sources.
22. One section of Hughes' discussion of the play is also headed 'The Tempest as a keyboard to the Complete Works' (SGCB 462).
23. Skea, A. Ted Hughes' *Vacanas*. <https://ann.skea.com/THVacanas.html>.
24. Faas, E. *The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980. p.203.
25. An adaptation from various sources of Artephius's *Liber Secretus*, including: Lapidus (Skinner), *In Pursuit of Gold*; Spearman, 1976 on Internet Archive (<https://archive.org>); and Roob, *Alchemy and Mysticism*, Taschen, 1997, p. 36, ref. *Bibl. des Philosophes Chimique*, Paris. Some versions end: 'he will never find the way out'.
26. Yates, F. *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, Routledge, 1999, p.191.
27. Yates, F. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, University of Chicago Press, 1964, pp.207–210.
- 28 Elizabeth Porges Watson (ed), *Defence of Poesie, Astrophil and Stella and other writings*. Sir Philip Sidney. Dent, London, 1997. p.91.
29. Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, p.199.
30. Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, p.101.
31. Yates, F. *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, p.187.
32. Gabriel Harvey referred to this title in a letter to Edmund Spencer at a time when they were both part of Sidney's circle. See Yates, F. *The Occult Philosophy in the*

Elizabethan Age, Routledge, 1999. p.112.

33. Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition, pp.187–8.

34. 'Mary Herbert, Countess of Pembroke (1555–1621)' in Clarke, A. (ed.), *Brief Lives*, Vol.1. by John Aubrey, Clarendon Press, 1898, p. 1165–6. Digital copy at <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/47787>.

35. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p.113.

36. Ackroyd, P. *Shakespeare: The Biography*, Chatto & Windus, London, 2005. p.176.

37. Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, p. 190.

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Ann Skea

Roebuck by Jacometto Veneziano

Among Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* manuscripts in the British Library are a number of old school textbooks in which Hughes wrote drafts of poems, most of which were eventually published in *Birthday Letters*. Hughes labeled these books S1 to S9, and the 'S' almost certainly alludes to Sylvia Plath.

In five of these books Hughes inscribed the heading 'The Sorrows of the Deer', and this was clearly the original title he chose for the *Birthday Letters* sequence. I have described elsewhere how the structure of the published sequence of *Birthday Letter* poems fits the pattern of a Cabbalistic/Hermetic journey¹, and in every such journey, as Hughes wrote when discussing *As You Like It* in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, "nothing is accidental"². So, why did he choose that strange early title for these poems?

Hughes was, of course, well aware that Robert Graves identified the deer as being sacred to the Great Goddess. Chapter XIV of *The White Goddess* is titled 'The Roebuck in the Thicket'; and according to Graves the Roebuck hides in a thicket of twenty–two sacred trees and its meaning is "Hides the Secret"³. Twenty–two happens to be the number of paths connecting the ten Sephiroth on the Cabbalistic Tree and the number of cards in the Major Arcana of the Tarot pack. Whether or not this was significant for Graves (he does not mention it), Hughes would have known it and it would have had

significant for him in his final structuring of the Birthday Letters sequence. Writing to Keith Sagar shortly after the publication of Birthday Letters, he also identified himself with the Roebuck, saying that his decision to return to writing poems about his life with Sylvia, was precipitated by “ the huge outcry that flushed me from my thicket in 70–71–72 when Sylvia’s poems & novel hit the first militant wave of Feminism as a divine revelation from their Patron Saint” 4.

Hughes’ deep knowledge of Shakespeare’s work also meant that he would have come across the stricken, weeping deer in two of Shakespeare’s plays, Hamlet and As You Like It, in both of which the deer is linked to secrets and self–revelation. Of the two plays, the second is the most likely influence on Ted’s choice of title, but Hamlet’s reference to a “stricken deer” and its possible link with the Renaissance philosopher and Cabbalist Giordano Bruno may also be relevant.

Hamlet makes this bitterly ironic remark when, after watching a performance of his own play, The Mouse Trap, Claudius flees, fearing that his secret has been revealed:

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch, while some must sleep:
So runs the world away –

Hamlet (III, ii, 272–4)

Here, there is paronomasia between ‘hart’ and ‘heart’; and the word ‘ungalled’ suggests a heart untouched by anger but also, since a gall is a parasitic growth, a heart which has not been parasitically infected in some way. Taken together, these words suggest that Hamlet see Claudius as a parasite who has sullied the pure love his mother had for his father. So, the deer, which in mythology is one of the forms of the shape–shifting Goddess of Love, weeps.

In a paper by Marianne Kumari, the ‘stricken deer’ is identified in several of Shakespeare’s plays, most notably in Hamlet, As You Like It and Twelfth Night⁵. She links these references to the life and work of Renaissance philosopher, mathematician, poet and Platonist, Giordano Bruno. In Gli Eroici Furori (The Heroic Frenzies), Bruno describes the encounter between Actaeon (who is out hunting deer with his dogs) and the Goddess Diana:

... he sees a bust and face more beautiful than e’er was seen
By mortal or divine, of scarlet, alabaster, and fine gold;
He sees, and the great hunter straight becomes that which he hunts.
The stag, that towards still thicker shades now goes with lighter steps,
His own great dogs swiftly devour.

Death of Acteon: Titian

Explaining his meaning, Bruno wrote that Actaeon signifies the intellect, intent on the pursuit of divine wisdom and the comprehension of divine beauty.... “So Actaeon with those thoughts – those dogs – which hunted outside themselves for goodness, wisdom,

and beauty, thus came into the presence of the same, and ravished out of himself by so much splendour, he became the prey, saw himself converted into that for which he was seeking, and perceived, that of his dogs or thoughts, he himself came to be the longed-for prey” 6.

Thus the myth of Actaeon and Diana becomes a metaphor for the passionate search by the heroic lover for Divine Eternal Truth, and Actaeon, the “stricken deer”, is the victim of the Goddess’s powers, but also of his own lack of self-knowledge. Birthday Letters, whilst resembling Bruno’s poem as a passionate and heroic expression of Hughes’ own search for truth, and as a record of his own negotiations with the Goddess, is also about seeking self-knowledge⁷.

In Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, the character, Jaques, weeps for the wounded deer and the whole play is about distorted love. Here, the First Lord describes to the Duke a wounded stag and Jaques’ identification with the creature:

First Lord: The melancholy Jaques grieves at that:

...

To-day my Lord of Amiens and myself
Did steal behind him as he lay along
Under an oak whose antique root peeps out
Upon the brook that brawls along this wood:
To the which place a poor sequestered stag
That from the hunter’s aim had ta’en a hurt
Did come to languish; and indeed my lord,
The wretched animal heav’d forth such groans
That their discharge did stretch his leathern coat
Almost to bursting; and the big round tears
Cours’d one another down his innocent nose
In piteous chase;

Duke: But what said Jaques?
Did he not moralize the spectacle?

First Lord: O, yes, into a thousand similes.

Duke: And did you leave him in this contemplation?

First Lord: We did, my lord, weeping and commenting
Upon the sobbing deer.

As You Like It (II, ii, 27–68)

Hughes, in his own lengthy discussion of Jaques in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being (SGCB 101–8), writes of Jaques as “a gloomy wallflower”, the one character in the play who stands apart and sees the distortion of love which takes place all around him. So, the melancholy Jaques/Shakespeare weeps over the wounded stag,

but he is also “a summarizing, unifying intelligence”, and “a kind of Hermes, the guide to the mysteries of the Underworld” who, symbolically, will restore harmony and “reassembles the whole, with ego and soul reunited in perfect love”⁸.

Hughes’ discussion of ritual Hermetic drama in this complicated analysis of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, is revealing. Early in the book, when he writes about Shakespeare and Occult Neoplatonism, many of the things he says apply equally to himself and to his own method of meditative visualisation and re-creation in *Birthday Letters*. Among the “archaic, magical, religious ideas and methods” which caught Shakespeare’s attention, he notes:

“The idea of as-if-factual visualization as the first practical essential of effective meditation (as in St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Disciples*, as well as in Cabbala).

The idea of meditation as a conjuring, by ritual magic, of hallucinatory figures – with whom conversations can be held, and who communicate intuitive, imaginative vision and clairvoyance.

The idea of ritual drama for the manipulation of the soul.”⁹.

In a letter to two German translators of *Birthday Letters* Hughes wrote of his “sense of communicating with her [Sylvia Plath] directly, so to speak”¹⁰: and constantly throughout the sequence he conjures her and visualises her: “I see you”, “There you are in all your innocence...”, “Now I see, I saw, sitting, the lonely /Girl who was going to die”; “you returned...”. As he remembers their love and their lives together, he also created vivid images of himself, and of Plath’s father, Otto, “I glimpsed him...”, “You stand there at the blackboard...”. Yet, nowhere in the sequence does he name Plath. Everywhere, in spite of the detailed, remembered biographical details of their life together, he addresses her as ‘you’, a direct form of address, but also one which allows him to link her with the Goddess, because “Every living woman”, as he wrote, in his *Vaccana Notebook*¹¹, represents a test which the Goddess sets for the human male. Every living woman embodies the Goddess.

Earlier in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes had expounded his idea of active ritual drama as a spell – “a kind of sympathetic magic” – “working on the assumption (archetypal and instinctive) that a deliberately shaped ritual can reactivate energies on a mythic plane so powerfully that they can recapture and reshape an ego that seems to have escaped them on the realistic plane”¹². This is exactly the sort of sympathetic magic (a self-revelatory, self-changing dramatic ritual) which Hughes was attempting when he wrote the *Birthday Letters* poems. *Birthday Letters* is a carefully structured, ritual re-enactment of love and loss in which Hughes himself (like Jaques) weeps for the wounded deer.

There are other indications that Hughes had a special interest in deer.

In 2003, when Daniel Weissbort was working on his book, *Ted Hughes: Selected*

Translations, he told me of Ted's fascination with a poem written by the Hungarian poet Ferenc Juhasz – 'The Boy Changed into a Stag Cries Out at the Gate of Secrets'. It is possible that Ted had first seen this poem in one of the collections of Hungarian poetry which he began to acquire when his interest in Eastern European poetry was first aroused. One anthology of Hungarian poetry from the 13th century to the present day, translated into French, was presented to Ted by the Hungarian poet Janos Csokits in 1963. Ted certainly saw the poem in *The Plough and the Pen: Writing from Hungary 1930-1956*¹³, and, as Daniel Weissbort records in his book, he thought the translation by Kenneth McRobbie "problematic", so he immediately rewrote it "working with great concentration and at speed"¹⁴.

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The whiteness of Snow,
The force of Fire,
The flashing of lightning,
The velocity of Wind,
The depth of the Sea,
The stability of the Earth,
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6. I have set around me all these powers,
Against every hostile savage power
Directed against my body and my soul,
Against the incantations of false prophets,
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Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional Birthday Letters and The Sorrows of the Deer
Ann Skea

Roebuck by Jacometto Veneziano

Among Ted Hughes' Birthday Letters manuscripts in the British Library are a number of old school textbooks in which Hughes wrote drafts of poems, most of which were

eventually published in Birthday Letters. Hughes labeled these books S1 to S9, and the 'S' almost certainly alludes to Sylvia Plath.

In five of these books Hughes inscribed the heading 'The Sorrows of the Deer', and this was clearly the original title he chose for the Birthday Letters sequence. I have described elsewhere how the structure of the published sequence of Birthday Letter poems fits the pattern of a Cabbalistic/Hermetic journey¹, and in every such journey, as Hughes wrote when discussing *As You Like It* in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, "nothing is accidental"². So, why did he choose that strange early title for these poems?

Hughes was, of course, well aware that Robert Graves identified the deer as being sacred to the Great Goddess. Chapter XIV of *The White Goddess* is titled 'The Roebuck in the Thicket'; and according to Graves the Roebuck hides in a thicket of twenty-two sacred trees and its meaning is "Hides the Secret"³. Twenty-two happens to be the number of paths connecting the ten Sephiroth on the Cabbalistic Tree and the number of cards in the Major Arcana of the Tarot pack. Whether or not this was significant for Graves (he does not mention it), Hughes would have known it and it would have had significant for him in his final structuring of the Birthday Letters sequence. Writing to Keith Sagar shortly after the publication of Birthday Letters, he also identified himself with the Roebuck, saying that his decision to return to writing poems about his life with Sylvia, was precipitated by "the huge outcry that flushed me from my thicket in 70–71–72 when Sylvia's poems & novel hit the first militant wave of Feminism as a divine revelation from their Patron Saint" ⁴.

Hughes' deep knowledge of Shakespeare's work also meant that he would have come across the stricken, weeping deer in two of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* and *As You Like It*, in both of which the deer is linked to secrets and self-revelation. Of the two plays, the second is the most likely influence on Ted's choice of title, but *Hamlet*'s reference to a "stricken deer" and its possible link with the Renaissance philosopher and Cabbalist Giordano Bruno may also be relevant.

Hamlet makes this bitterly ironic remark when, after watching a performance of his own play, *The Mouse Trap*, Claudius flees, fearing that his secret has been revealed:

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch, while some must sleep:
So runs the world away –

Hamlet (III, ii, 272–4)

Here, there is paronomasia between 'hart' and 'heart'; and the word 'ungalled' suggests a heart untouched by anger but also, since a gall is a parasitic growth, a heart which has not been parasitically infected in some way. Taken together, these words suggest that *Hamlet* see Claudius as a parasite who has sullied the pure love his mother had for his father. So, the deer, which in mythology is one of the forms of the shape-shifting

Goddess of Love, weeps.

In a paper by Marianne Kumari, the 'stricken deer' is identified in several of Shakespeare's plays, most notably in *Hamlet*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*⁵. She links these references to the life and work of Renaissance philosopher, mathematician, poet and Platonist, Giordano Bruno. In *Gli Eroici Furori* (The Heroic Frenzies), Bruno describes the encounter between Actaeon (who is out hunting deer with his dogs) and the Goddess Diana:

... he sees a bust and face more beautiful than e'er was seen
By mortal or divine, of scarlet, alabaster, and fine gold;
He sees, and the great hunter straight becomes that which he hunts.
The stag, that towards still thicker shades now goes with lighter steps,
His own great dogs swiftly devour.

Death of Acteon: Titian

Explaining his meaning, Bruno wrote that Actaeon signifies the intellect, intent on the pursuit of divine wisdom and the comprehension of divine beauty.... "So Actaeon with those thoughts – those dogs – which hunted outside themselves for goodness, wisdom, and beauty, thus came into the presence of the same, and ravished out of himself by so much splendour, he became the prey, saw himself converted into that for which he was seeking, and perceived, that of his dogs or thoughts, he himself came to be the longed&for prey" ⁶.

Thus the myth of Actaeon and Diana becomes a metaphor for the passionate search by the heroic lover for Divine Eternal Truth, and Actaeon, the "stricken deer", is the victim of the Goddess's powers, but also of his own lack of self-knowledge. Birthday Letters, whilst resembling Bruno's poem as a passionate and heroic expression of Hughes' own search for truth, and as a record of his own negotiations with the Goddess, is also about seeking self-knowledge⁷.

In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the character, Jaques, weeps for the wounded deer and the whole play is about distorted love. Here, the First Lord describes to the Duke a wounded stag and Jaques' identification with the creature:

First Lord: The melancholy Jaques grieves at that:

...

To-day my Lord of Amiens and myself
Did steal behind him as he lay along
Under an oak whose antique root peeps out
Upon the brook that brawls along this wood:
To the which place a poor sequestered stag
That from the hunter's aim had ta'en a hurt
Did come to languish; and indeed my lord,
The wretched animal heav'd forth such groans
That their discharge did stretch his leathern coat
Almost to bursting; and the big round tears

Cours'd one another down his innocent nose
In piteous chase;

Duke: But what said Jaques?
Did he not moralize the spectacle?

First Lord: O, yes, into a thousand similes.

Duke: And did you leave him in this contemplation?

First Lord: We did, my lord, weeping and commenting
Upon the sobbing deer.

As You Like It (II, ii, 27–68)

Hughes, in his own lengthy discussion of Jaques in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being (SGCB 101–8), writes of Jaques as “a gloomy wallflower”, the one character in the play who stands apart and sees the distortion of love which takes place all around him. So, the melancholy Jaques/Shakespeare weeps over the wounded stag, but he is also “a summarizing, unifying intelligence”, and “a kind of Hermes, the guide to the mysteries of the Underworld” who, symbolically, will restore harmony and “reassembles the whole, with ego and soul reunited in perfect love”⁸.

Hughes' discussion of ritual Hermetic drama in this complicated analysis of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, is revealing. Early in the book, when he writes about Shakespeare and Occult Neoplatonism, many of the things he says apply equally to himself and to his own method of meditative visualisation and re-creation in *Birthday Letters*. Among the “archaic, magical, religious ideas and methods” which caught Shakespeare's attention, he notes:

“The idea of as-if-factual visualization as the first practical essential of effective meditation (as in St. Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Disciples*, as well as in Cabbala).

The idea of meditation as a conjuring, by ritual magic, of hallucinatory figures – with whom conversations can be held, and who communicate intuitive, imaginative vision and clairvoyance.

The idea of ritual drama for the manipulation of the soul.”⁹.

In a letter to two German translators of *Birthday Letters* Hughes wrote of his “sense of communicating with her [Sylvia Plath] directly, so to speak”¹⁰: and constantly throughout the sequence he conjures her and visualises her: “I see you”, “There you are in all your innocence...”, “Now I see, I saw, sitting, the lonely /Girl who was going to die”; “you returned...”. As he remembers their love and their lives together, he also created vivid images of himself, and of Plath's father, Otto, “I glimpsed him...”, “You stand there at the blackboard...”. Yet, nowhere in the sequence does he name Plath. Everywhere, in spite of the detailed, remembered biographical details of their life

together, he addresses her as 'you', a direct form of address, but also one which allows him to link her with the Goddess, because "Every living woman", as he wrote, in his *Vaccana Notebook*¹¹, represents a test which the Goddess sets for the human male. Every living woman embodies the Goddess.

Earlier in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes had expounded his idea of active ritual drama as a spell – "a kind of sympathetic magic" – "working on the assumption (archetypal and instinctive) that a deliberately shaped ritual can reactivate energies on a mythic plane so powerfully that they can recapture and reshape an ego that seems to have escaped them on the realistic plane"¹². This is exactly the sort of sympathetic magic (a self-revelatory, self-changing dramatic ritual) which Hughes was attempting when he wrote the *Birthday Letters* poems. *Birthday Letters* is a carefully structured, ritual re-enactment of love and loss in which Hughes himself (like Jaques) weeps for the wounded deer.

There are other indications that Hughes had a special interest in deer.

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Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest

A close analysis of Ted Hughes' creative alchemy in the poetic sequences of Cave Birds, Remains of Elmet and River.

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Solution and Distillation: Sulphur.

Chapter 8. Stage Four of the Alchemical Synthesis:
Conjunction, Crystallisation, Projection.

Appendix.

Notes on the origin, performance and publication of Cave Birds

Table 2.

The titles and order of poems in the published edition of Cave Birds (Faber 1978)
and in the two lists among the drafts held by Exeter University.

Elmet Cover

Remains of Elmet

Chapter 9. 'The fallen sun'...

Chapter 10. '... Where the Mothers'

Chapter 11. '...at the dead end of a wrong direction'

Chapter 12. 'Before these chimneys can rise again'...

Chapter 13. 'I swallowed an alarm clock'

River Cover

River

Chapter 14. 'The liturgy of the earth's tidings'

Conclusion.

Variant Editions.

Abbreviations used in the text.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalPreface

"The struggle truly to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self, has been Man's principal occupation, wherever he could find leisure for it, ever since he first grew this enormous surplus of brain. Men have invented religion to do this for others. But to do it for themselves, they have invented art – music, painting, dancing, sculpture, and the activity that includes all these, which is poetry." (PIM 124).

Ted Hughes was a poet of unusual dedication. Not only was poetry his profession for most of his adult life, but during this time he repeatedly and consistently expressed his beliefs in what poetry is, what it does, and what it means to be a poet. Clearly, he believed that poetry has a purpose, and he pursued that purpose with the discipline and persistence that is more usually the mark of those inspired with religious fervour. Nor is this analogy particularly false, for Hughes himself described the writing of poetry as a quest "for self-knowledge and perhaps, in one form or another, [for] grace" (PIM 12).

In discussing this aspect of Hughes' work, Keith Sagar said that a great poet, to effect changes in his reader, needs first "to save himself, cure himself, in the role of Everyman"¹. This is done not simply by imagining the process of self-examination and re-creation, but by living through the process and using imagination and poetry as tools by which to achieve his ends. The opus of Hughes' work demonstrates just such poetic purpose, and it demonstrates, too, his more traditional use of an Everyman figure as a persona through which each of us can share this imaginative, healing journey.

That there is an altruistic aspect to Hughes' purpose is apparent from his work. He wrote and spoke frequently about the distortions and divisions caused in individuals and in our society by our unbalanced reliance on scientific, rational and objective perception. To this, and to the consequent suppression of everything which cannot be scientifically analysed – feelings, intuition, imagination and religious belief – he attributed our unrealistically detached attitude towards nature, the consequent neuroses of our society, and the perilous state of the world in which we live. His desire to change this situation, and to counteract "the state of mind, which ... will watch the whole world disintegrate without lifting a finger, without offering a single alternative plan" (ME-1 60) is apparent in much of his early prose writing and it became an integral part of his longer poetic works. It was essentially bound up with his faith in the transforming power of the imagination, because, as he once said, "what affects a person's imagination affects their whole life" (ME-1 61). And it was a task which was as important to him as is his own, more personal, quest.

The scope of Hughes' work, and of the beliefs from which it stems, is broad, but underlying the main body of his work is Wodwo's question "What am I?" (W.183). Continually, Hughes explored its ramifications, drawing on his own experiences and life to do so but working, always, in a manner and within a context which extends their relevance from the personal to the universal. "Poem by poem, book by book"² one can trace his exploration of the nature of Mankind, of his own and our place in the world, and of the relationship between Mankind and Nature, mind and matter, rational thought and imagination. One can see, too, Hughes' concern with the relationship between the human and the divine, the transient and the eternal, and the particular importance of his preoccupation with the relationship between the creative arts, the artist, and the Universal Energies which he regarded as the source of all. This complex of ideas, attitudes, beliefs, and goals was the ultimate source of Hughes' inspiration and, in a cyclical fashion which become fundamental to his work, it shaped it and was shaped by it. So, by continually working through the process of self-examination, Hughes formulated answers which were presented in his poetry with increasing certainty, authority and skill.

In his poetic sequences, *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet*, and *River*, Hughes created deliberate parallels between his own journey towards enlightenment and the journeys of questing Everyman figures in myth and epic. Like the Everyman hero, the paths which Hughes took in his quest were often decided by events and experiences in his own life. There is also a common pattern of struggle, pain and sacrifice through which the quester achieves enlightenment and healing. This pattern, Hughes believed, is

universally present in Nature and has been reflected in the literature and lore of Mankind throughout history. Through his work, Hughes deliberately sought to involve his readers in a process of enlightenment and change.

The beliefs and ideas which underlie Hughes' work are complex. This discussion, therefore, begins by presenting, as far as possible in his own words, Hughes' view of poetry as a product of the poet's inner world; his belief in its communicative power; and his faith in it as a vehicle through which suppressed energies may be released so that wholeness and harmony may be restored to our world. It deals, also, with Hughes' concept of Universal Energies and their presence in Nature, and with their relevance to his poetic purpose.

Whilst each of Hughes' sequences of poetry represents a further stage in his dealings with the Universal Energies and a new exploration of the communicative and shaping power of poetry and myth, his involvement with Orghast gave him a unique opportunity to test the validity of his beliefs. The practical and immediate nature of the work on Orghast provided Hughes with an experimental situation within which to assess the power and the limitations of language, music, drama and myth, and his experiences with Peter Brook's drama company confirmed and strengthened his beliefs and strongly influenced the subsequent direction of his poetry. In particular, Hughes' use of myth as an aid to imaginative communication in Orghast, and his work with the Sufi fable, *The Conference of The Birds*, can be seen as two important formative influences which shaped the *Cave Birds* sequence. At this time, too, Hughes wrote the short sequences of poems, 'Prometheus on His Crag' (THCP 285–296) and 'Adam and the Sacred Nine' (THCP 443–451), both of which have close thematic links with *Cave Birds* and *Remains of Elmet*.

Orghast, I believe, began an intensive and prolonged attempt by Hughes to link human and elemental energies, using myth as a means of enhancing communication and as a protective controlling structure within which to work. *Cave Birds* and *Remains of Elmet* show the development of this endeavour in poetic sequences which thematically parallel Hughes' own quest for the source of healing energies – for *mana*. *River*, in this schema, describes the culmination of Hughes' quest, and it presents the enlightenment, the 'Truth' which Hughes gained by his journey, in a work which is both a representation of, and a vehicle for, the universal energies of The Source itself.

In *Cave Birds*, Hughes' quest for truth and enlightenment is expressed in the shape, the theme, and the content of the sequence, and in the creative, imaginative process through which he and his readers share the experiences of the protagonist. Hughes' choice of Alchemy as a framework within which to develop the *Cave Birds* theme is particularly apt, but to appreciate this it is necessary to know something about the alchemical process and the various levels on which it can be understood. Since Alchemy is a complex and confusing subject, I have tried to simplify my explanation of it enough for its relevance to *Cave Birds* to be apparent to the reader whose interest is in Hughes' poetry rather than in Alchemy per se. Those who desire a deeper knowledge of Alchemy must necessarily undertake the research for themselves, since this is the

essential nature of the alchemical art.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes continued to pursue his poetic purpose, building on the experience of *Cave Birds* and adopting, in a manner similar to that of Blake, a prophetic role in his attempt to effect change and healing in our world. This sequence shows his increasing ability to immerse himself deeply in the creative/re-creative process using, now, his own personal heritage as a source of inspiration. Hughes'

Yorkshire–Celtic–Norse heritage is but one strand of the twined thematic threads on which these poems are strung: other strands carry the Hermetic theme of the imprisonment and release of divine light, with its related religious/mythical belief in the spiritual fall and salvation of Mankind; and the theme of the war between Man and Nature, as exemplified by the history of the Calder Valley.

The third poetic sequence which I discuss is *River*. Because of the complex, holistic nature of this sequence, I have dealt with it in a broader fashion, attempting to show the way in which it continues to demonstrate Hughes' struggle for union with the energies of the Source and his overall re–creative, healing, sacralising purpose. *River*, I believe, shows the extent of the development which has taken place in Hughes' personal beliefs through his work with *Cave Birds* and *Remains of Elmet*. It presents the 'Truth', as Hughes sees it: and it exemplifies the great skill with which Hughes handles the creative energies and unites the many conflicting and contrary elements of our world in a realistic, but imaginatively conceived whole. It shows the ways in which Hughes constantly tried to put his beliefs into practice in his work: how his personal heritage and experiences were again generalised through the use of an Everyman figure; and how myth and epic had become, for him, an essential part of the creative/re–creative process.

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The Energies and the Inner World

Ted Hughes consistently represented the creative process as a way of capturing the inner world of the artist. "You only write the poetry you find in yourself", he once said¹. And in 1976, when questioned about the aims of the Arvon Foundation², he spoke of the need to let young people experience the way in which writing can lead them "into the world of perceptions and understanding which art attempts to express ... a very big world – the world of those who in every age attempt to explore and express the human spirit"³.

Similarly, in his Foreword to a book by John Moat and John Fairfax (initiators of the Arvon Foundation courses), Hughes wrote of literature as “a living organism, part of the human organism, something which embodies the psychological record of this drama of being alive, something which articulates and illuminates the depth and range and subtlety of being human”⁴.

The inner world of the human organism is the world of our instincts, feelings and imagination, and it is “closer [to us] than the outer world, more decisive, and utterly different” (ME–2.85). Yet, Hughes believed that it is an area of our experience from which we are becoming increasingly alienated.

In two related but different essays published in 1970 and 1976, and both entitled ‘Myth and Education’, Hughes dealt at length with the inner world, and with the divisive influence that Platonic rationalism has had on our perceptions and beliefs⁵. He argued persuasively that “three hundred years of rational enlightenment” based on the analytical, deductive methods of Plato, have taught us to divide all human experience into two categories – objective, verifiable ‘facts’, which are valued; and subjective, unverifiable data, which is not (ME–1.56). Such a division, he believed, is artificial and damaging. It places too much emphasis on Mankind’s rational abilities, channels all our attention passively and objectively towards the outer world, and disconnects us from the experiences of our own bodies – from our inner worlds. This passive objectivity, Hughes wrote,

is a scientific ideal. And it is a powerful ideal, it has created the modern world. And without it the modern world would fall to pieces: infinite misery would result. The disaster is, that it is heading straight towards infinite misery, because it has persuaded human beings to identify themselves with what is no more than a narrow mode of perception (ME–2.87).

Excluded from this “narrow mode” of rational perception is everything which is subjective, non–rational, and instinctive. Yet Hughes believed, as Blake did, that the promptings of our inner worlds of instinct and feeling should not be ignored: that through these, aided by our imagination, we have access to other, very different, knowledge which is as important as that obtained through our five senses. As Blake wrote:

Mans perceptions are not bound by organs of perception; he perceives more than sense (tho’ ever so acute) can discover (There is No Natural Religion. Pl.[b]l).

Yet, the imaginative faculty, through which we receive many of these non–sensory perceptions, has itself been subjected to the divisive test of rationality. Because our imagination is essentially personal and unquantifiable, we have been taught to regard most of its functions as irrational – rather than simply non–rational. To the extent that imagination enables us to recall to the ‘mental–eye’ images of objects and events we have encountered in the physical world, and to make practical, rational predictions about that world, it is accepted. But all of those imaginative perceptions which are

based on instinct and feeling are viewed with suspicion; and a whole world of knowledge which was once essential to the survival of our species is seen as dangerously imprecise and, therefore, valueless. Rationality and objectivity have become the only criteria for knowledge, despite the fact that “a detached, passively recording attitude, is of no use whatsoever when it comes to dealing with our own minds and hearts. It is useless in the most vital activity of all. The activity of understanding ourselves” (ME–1.57).

Compounding this error of perception, Hughes argued, Western society has brought rational scepticism and scientific objectivity to bear on its spiritual beliefs and has found them wanting. Religion, which once legitimised the inner spiritual world and “embraced and humanised the archaic energies of instinct and feeling” (ME–2.90), was first distorted by “puritanism, and the puritanical outlook”(ME–1.69), which alienated people from their natural emotions and instincts, and is now rejected by scientific rationalism. So, we have devalued the ancient beliefs, rituals and stories which once gave meaning, shape and importance to the inner world, and which “had conversed in simple but profound terms with the forces struggling inside people, and had civilised them, or attempted to”.

And so, denied the expression and control which religion allowed it, the inner world has become “elemental, chaotic, continually more primitive and beyond our control ... a place of demons”, a place from which we are cut off because we no longer have any acceptable means of receiving and interpreting its signals (ME–2.90).

Pride in our own rational abilities has distorted our perceptions, immobilised our imagination, and cut us off from that part of our own being which is most closely concerned with the natural energies which we share with all living things. It has given us a false sense of our own ability to control ourselves and the world around us. And it has produced what Hughes called a “chronically sick society” (ME–1.60) in which the prevailing morality is passively inhuman, egotistical and neurotic.

Hughes wrote that there is “no question of reversing the trend, abandoning science”, but his artistic purpose was always to use imagination and the creative arts to re-establish the connection between our inner and outer worlds (ME–1.60). He believed that art not only expresses the human spirit, it also has the power to reconcile the divisions we have made and to demonstrate that the laws of our divided worlds “are not contradictory at all; they are one all-inclusive system”(ME–2.92). He also believed that these laws are the laws of human nature and, in restating them, great works of art display a pattern of struggle which is imaginatively recognisable and provide us with a “formula that reconciles everything, and balances every imbalance”(ME–2.92).

Myth, in particular, impressed Hughes with its power to restate the laws of human nature. He described it as “tribal dreams of the highest order of inspiration and truth, at their best”. And, because of the common patterns and the vivid images which myth embodies, he saw it as “an archive of draft plans” on which the imagination can work and through which we can better understand and reconcile the conflicting energies with

which we live (ME–2.93).

Hughes' faith in the imaginative healing power of myth was based, in part, on his knowledge of Ancient Greek, Sufi, and Hermetic philosophies and practices. For each of these groups, ritual story–telling had (and for Sufis and Hermeticists still has) an important educative, spiritual and psychological purpose, being deliberately used to cause imaginative change in the listener and, thereby, to alter that person's ideas, beliefs and understanding. Such ritual story–telling, and the power to stimulate imaginative alterations, needs to be carefully controlled, because, in a completely imaginative way, the story works on all parts of our nature, and it's impossible to know finally what its influences are.(ME–1.67).

For this reason, the knowledge and skill of the story–teller and his or her ability to control the 'magical' effects of the chosen story are of utmost importance. And the story–teller's own understanding of the inner world from which the imaginative impetus comes is essential.

Traditionally, especially in societies which have no written history, the story–teller is an individual who preserves and passes on the accumulated, and often sacred, knowledge of the group. Hughes, writing of our own literary heritage, called it "the sacred book of the tribe", something which "enshrines our deepest knowledge of ourselves" and which carries the "national soul"⁶. The story–teller, therefore, is vital to the tribe's identity, continuity, and spiritual well–being.

Traditionally, too, the special wisdom and skill of the story–teller's art is learned only through constant and disciplined effort. In this learning task, myth and legend are important not only for their effects on the listener, but also because the common pattern of their themes offers valuable guidance to the story–teller, suggesting the most fruitful paths that may be followed and indicating the accumulated 'truths' of many societies.

In the common thematic patterns of world myth, and of the traditional stories of many cultural groups, Hughes traced the outline of the heroic quest – the epic journey towards enlightenment and healing which imaginatively extends our vision beyond the confines of the ordinary world. This epic journey has, he suggested, three historically familiar forms, with religious quest as the most civilised form, and heroic epic as the barbaric form, and the shaman's dream of his flight as the prototypical and, as it were, biological form,⁷.

All three of these epic forms can be found enmeshed in Hughes' own story–telling sequences; and myth and epic can be seen to play a fundamental part in his life and work. He drew on the well–known mythological and religious literature of our own culture (often by means of the allusive power of a single significant word) to stimulate the imagination of his readers and to put them in touch with their inner worlds. He used myth as a framework on which to build his longer poetic sequences, being guided and guiding his readers by its patterns, and personally traversing the paths of the hero in the process. And, increasingly, he used the ritual aspects of myth and story–telling to

control the energies released by his own poetic, shamanic flights, putting himself through the shamanic journey in order to find, and return with, some powerful healing energies.

For Hughes, poetry itself was a shamanic journey. In his prose writing, in introductions to poetry readings, and in interviews, he constantly connected poetry and myth with shamanism, emphasising the healing, regenerative, magical power of each. Poetry is a vehicle for our inner life, an expression of our inner energies, and in the great narrative poems, epics and sagas, it records the shamanic journey to the underworld, the shaman's 'Heroic Quest' which is "one of the main regenerating dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event"⁸. But it is not the narrative, or the language or the style of the poetry which are important: "You choose a subject because it serves, because you need it" and— the narrative is "just a way of getting a big body of energy moving along a track"⁹. Hughes' fundamental concern was with the energy itself, and with the universal cosmic force which he believed controls the death/rebirth cycles that pattern events in this world. He saw this force most clearly expressed in the world of Nature, which is "what we have to live in, what we are part of, what we grow out of"(ME-1.69), and it is to Nature that he most frequently turns, both imaginatively and literally, for inspiration and renewal.

Over the years, Hughes dealt with Nature in a variety of ways. In particular, Nature is present in his work as the Triple Goddess – Bride, Mother and Hag: the Goddess of Creation, Fertility and Death – who is the Goddess of Nature. Keith Sagar, in *The Art of Ted Hughes*, traced the pathways of the Goddess as, in her various forms, she threads her way through Hughes' poetic work. There is no doubt that she plays a central role, both in the form of ever present natural forces and as the source of the many powerful, and often threatening, female figures in Hughes' poems. In addition, Hughes' use of Nature was directed, as Sagar suggests, towards the restoration of Blakean 'four-fold vision' and of the holistic perception that we have lost through rationalism and pride¹⁰. Whilst the parallels between Blake and Hughes are very evident in their shared belief in the power of imagination to achieve spiritual renewal, and in the similarity of their concern for the destructive forces of war, industry and religion, Hughes' depiction of the natural world is quite different to that of Blake. Hughes' descriptions are precise and vividly sensual: the images and symbols which he uses most powerfully are those which derive directly from his own experience; and his creatures have a characteristic energy even whilst they serve symbolic purposes. So, whilst Blake's 'Robin Red breast' remains un-described in its cage waiting for Heaven's "Rage" to redress such wrongs ('Auguries of Innocence', Lines 5–6, The "Pickering" MS.) Hughes summons his caged animals into being so that we see their beauty and feel the powerful energies they embody and the barely suppressed violence which threatens their human keepers.

The Energies themselves, Hughes undoubtedly saw as a form of spiritual energy. Not the narrow formalised version of spiritual energy which is the concern of such rigid forms of religion as that of which Hughes wrote so scathingly in 'Mount Zion' (THCP.480), and with which he dealt at length in his 'Note' to A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse: but the great range of cosmic energies of which we are

sometimes aware, and which Hughes saw as underlying many of our imaginative and spiritual endeavours. These are the energies which are frequently exemplified in Hughes' poetry by the cyclic life/death patterns of Nature.

Hughes believed very strongly that people, like other animals, have access to these energies: that buried deep in all living things is something which he once called "The luminous spirit (maybe he is a crowd of spirits), that takes account of everything and gives everything its meaning". His apprehension of this 'being' is of something living "somewhere at the core of us – strange, beautiful, pathetic, terrible"; something which is "a truth under all the truths" and which "opens a door to a world of spirit – nothing else, it simply opens a door. and that other world is present. And it is as if the whole of Creation were suddenly present"¹¹.

Hughes' view of this universal spirit energy was not simple. It encompassed the sort of psychic spiritualism which Yeats experienced, Hughes' own vivid dreams and the animals which he regards as his shamanic guides, and some of the most profound and widespread religious beliefs in the world, amongst which Alchemy and the oriental philosophies have been particularly influential in shaping his work. He spoke of it as Nature, the Goddess, Pan, and as an elemental demonic force. In his introduction to *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin* he described it as mana – the underlying force in nature, art and music; something which creates in us a paradoxical awareness of both horror and beauty: something which is "the core of life, like the black, ultimate resource of the organism"¹². Like Lorca's Duende, it is "the mystery, the roots fastened in the mire that we all know and all ignore, the mire that gives us the very substance of art"¹³. And like Lorca, and also Nietzsche, Hughes saw the necessity of confronting this demonic, magical power which exists around and within us, and also the danger of suppressing it, since it is an essential part of our whole being. "Every man and every artist", wrote Lorca, "whether he is Nietzsche or Cezanne, climbs each step in the tower of his perfection by fighting his duende", for the Duende is

a mental wind blowing relentlessly over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents; a wind that smells of baby's spittle, crushed grass, and jellyfish veil, announcing the constant baptism of newly created things¹⁴.

In Hughes' words, Lorca's Duende/energy is "a divine horror – a thunderbolt beautiful and terrible"¹⁵.

The idea of the existence of some universal energy or power is as old as Mankind itself. For anthropologists it is the source of all the magical and religious beliefs and practices which people have developed over the centuries. Such ideas, however, are not confined to the realms of primitive thought, nor are they limited to any particular group of people, such as poets or musicians. In an attempt to quantify the spiritual aspect of human nature, Oxford Zoologist, Sir Alister Hardy, recorded the effects of "specific, deeply felt, transcendental experiences" as reported by a wide range of people, including children, atheists and agnostics. Such an experience, he found, "usually induces in the person concerned a conviction that there is another [non-physical] dimension to life"¹⁶.

Sir Alister records, also, that in his research into spiritual experience, he found a strong link between transcendental experiences and aesthetic and creative activities. Prayer and meditation, natural beauty, literature and music, rate highly as “triggers” of spiritual experience. Similarly, Hughes wrote:

Some animals and birds express this being pure and without effort, and then you hear the whole desolate, final actuality of existence in a voice, a tone. There we recognise a spirit, a truth under all the truths. Far beyond human word ... It is a spirit and it speaks to a spirit. Sometimes singers have this elemental, bottomless, impersonal, perfect quality, which seems open up to the whole Creation... Children acting sometimes have it, and it is the distinctive thing in the recorded chanting of religious texts, where they are distinctive at all, or in the recorded singing of primitive holy men¹⁷.

Hardy's factual, statistical, and 'scientific' assessment of such subjective data appears to make the subject more 'concrete', and hence more acceptable in our rational, science-orientated world: but Hughes' poetic descriptions of the same kind of experience offer a more immediate appreciation of its quality and impact.

Hughes' belief in the power of music to trigger spiritual experience was of particular importance to his work. He was aware that from the earliest times music has been used by primitive people to promote trance and ecstatic states, and that it has always been an important part of religious ritual. He knew, too, that, since it is independent of language and seems not to be an attempt by man to imitate nature (in the way that Aristotle believed that literature and art were), philosophers have sometimes sought to explain its existence and its influence in terms of a direct link with the Universal Energies. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche (whose works were familiar to Hughes) regarded music as the pure expression of the universal energy which they called 'The Will'. In his essay, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche wrote:

Language can never adequately render the cosmic symbolism of music, because music stands in symbolic relation to the primordial contradiction and primordial pain in the heart of the Primal Unity, and therefore symbolises a sphere which is beyond and before all phenomena. Rather are all phenomena, compared with it, merely symbols; hence language, as the organ and symbol of phenomena, can never, by any means, disclose the innermost heart of music¹⁸.

Acknowledging Schopenhauer's description of the terrible awe which the rationally inexplicable arouses, Nietzsche wrote, also, of the ability of music to link man with the “Primal Unity” through the awakening of Dionysian ecstasy and “self-forgetfulness” which occurs in communal musical activity. “Under the charm of the Dionysian”, he wrote,

not only is the union between man and man reaffirmed, but Nature which has become estranged, hostile, or subjugated, celebrates once more her reconciliation with her prodigal son, man¹⁹.

Yet, despite his belief in the inadequacy of language to explain the powers of music, Nietzsche saw a close relationship between music, lyric poetry and drama, linking each with energies “which burst forth from nature herself, without the mediation of the human artist”²⁰. Music, however, he considered as the most fundamental and deeply significant of these arts. In poetry and drama, unlike music, other antithetical sub-conscious energies (which he called ‘Apollonian’) exert a controlling and shaping influence on the Dionysian energies, and he described the “dialectical resolution”²¹ of these dual “art-impulses of nature”²² as the source of the great artistic creations of Hellenic poetry and drama. Yet, whilst Nietzsche regarded the Apollonian and Dionysian energies as the necessary source of all works of art, it was the Dionysian energies, and in particular music, which he believed gave access “to the innermost heart of things”²³.

There are many similarities between Nietzsche’s view of the creative arts and those of Hughes who, in a 1962 book review, wrote of the close links between music and poetry: Poetry at its most primitive seems first to occur as a one-line chant of nonsense syllables in accompaniment to the rhythm of a stamping dance²⁴. At the same time, he called primitive songs “power charms” or “tools” designed to control the spiritual energies in some way. Hughes also believed that “music holds the key” to those powerful energies which can be experienced through great works of art: and that “In all art, everything that isn’t the music rides on the music. Without that inner musicality of every particle, art ceases to do the work and have the effect and retain the name of art”²⁵. In an interview with Drew Heinze, Hughes spoke of “the magical healing power of art” and how, although prose narratives can carry this healing, “Poetry does it more intensely. Music maybe most intensely of all”²⁶. And discussing his language, ‘Orghast’, in 1971, he spoke of music as being “mathematically precise but completely mysterious and open, giving access to a deeper world, closed to direct analysis”²⁷.

For Hughes, as for Nietzsche, the music which connects man with the Energies is made by the combination of words, rhythm, sound and sense, which can be achieved in poetry or poetic drama. So, in *Gaudete*, which is Hughes’ most thorough exploration of the Dionysian energies, music of every kind plays an important role. Early in this poetic drama, when Jennifer Estridge plays a Beethoven sonata, the music seems to be “Havocking polished, interior glooms” (G.41), and it deeply disturbs her father who finds it “Unmanageable and frightening”. He “Cannot interpret those atmospherics / And soundings and cries” and “he hears / Something final approaching. // An evil / Like his own creeping, death-dawn—emptiness fear”(G.42).

Gaudete Cover

This music, “Like a materialised demon” (G.44), brings in its wake havoc and death. Later, in one of the most horrifying episodes in *Gaudete*, the Reverend Lumb and the women of his parish enact a ritual in which “the pipe and drum music” controls them as if it is a “tight, shuddering, repetitive machine” in which Lumb and the women are “mechanical parts ... fastened into it”. With his words Hughes recreates the powerful, throbbing, rhythms of the music: “A hobbling, nodding, four-square music, a goblin monotony,/ The women in a circle clapping to the tread of it . / Their hair dangles loose,

their eyes slide oiled, their faces oiled with sweat / In the trundling treadmill of it”(G.139).

As the music becomes progressively more insistent, the Dionysian energies take over and run out of control until “Everything and everybody is moving / As if the music were the tumbling and boiling of a cauldron”. (G.145). Until, finally, in this trance-like, demonic scene, the powerful music climaxes in the ritual sacrifice of one of the women.

In his 1971 interview with Ekbert Faas, Hughes spoke of the dangers of releasing such Dionysian energies, even within his own poetry. Parts I and II of his poem, ‘Gog’ (THCP.161-4), for example, alarmed him so much, he said, that he wrote the poem about “the Red Cross Knight just to set against it with the idea of keeping it under control”²⁸. He went on to explain in some detail his use of poetry as a means of both contacting and controlling the Universal Energies. Just as myth and religion provide a framework of ritual within which these energies can be experienced and explored in a controlled way, so Hughes used poetry as a carefully constructed ritual in which powerful symbols link the poet and the reader with the ‘elemental power circuit of the universe’. Thus, in *Gaudete*, as in much of his work, he uses his skill to shape his poetry and to provide the ‘Apollonian’, logical control over the universal force which is the subject and content of the work. From the point of view of Hughes’ own creative work, his most significant statement concerning the Energies is that he believed that “the sole original purpose of the sound and action of poetic drama was to engage that world [the world of spirit], open it, and act out its pressures and puzzle over its laws”(WP.125).

He repeatedly spoke of his belief in the power of poetry to tap the spiritual energies within us and to “express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are” (PIM.124); and of the poet’s ability to make contact with the greater energies of the universe of which we are only dimly aware.

Because of his beliefs, Hughes personally explored the Energies in a number of different ways. His book reviews show the breadth of his interests covering, as they do, such topics as drama, folklore, myth, Shamanism, Sufism, magic and poetry. Sylvia Plath, his first wife, wrote of his knowledge of Astrology and of their experiments with the ouija board as a source of inspiration for their poetry²⁹. And Hughes had sufficient knowledge of Buddhist thought to have written the libretto for an opera by the Chinese composer, Chou Wen-chung, based on the *Bardo Thodol* ³⁰. Increasingly, however, Hughes was drawn towards the image of the poet as one who invokes the Energies through powerful symbols and makes them subservient to himself: one who, like a shaman, can use the Energies as “a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community’s affairs”³¹.

Mircea Eliade, whose book on shamanism Hughes reviewed in 1964, describes the shaman as “indispensable in any ceremony which concerns the experiences of the human soul”³², and Hughes, who studied anthropology and archaeology at Cambridge and had a wide knowledge of primitive peoples and their ideas, mythologies and rituals, increasingly adopted the role of poet/shaman, using shamanic techniques to pursue his healing purposes. Poetry, as he told to Faas, is a “record of just how the forces of the

Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by man”³³. Poetry, therefore, was not just Hughes’ personal means of linking his own inner and outer worlds: it was an expression of the Universal Energies in action and, through its musical power and its power to stimulate the common human faculty of imagination, he used it as a means of channelling these healing energies to others.

In another respect, also, the role of poet/shaman had particular appeal for Hughes, since it combines the primitive and poetic ability to contact the subconscious mind with an awareness of the importance of dreams and symbols. In reviewing Mircea Eliade’s book on shamanism, he wrote:

The initiation dreams, the general schema of the shamanic flight, and the figures and adventures they encounter are not a shaman monopoly: they are, in fact, the basic experience of the poetic temperament we call ‘romantic’³⁴.

Perhaps, because of his own visionary experiences with poetry and dreams, or because he agreed with Schopenhauer that dreams afford a glimpse of a quite different reality, Hughes was fascinated by the link between poetry, dreams, the subconscious mind, and the potentially healing Universal Energies.

Like the shaman, who is summoned to his calling by dreams or visions, Hughes paid particular attention to his dreams: and the animal spirits that summon and guide the shaman find their counterparts in the animals in Hughes’ poems. Hughes spoke to Faas of the symbolic nature of his Jaguars, and many of his animal subjects contain a force and energy far beyond a simple animal picture: the menacing horses in his story, ‘The Rain Horse’ (W.45-55), for example; the rat in ‘Song of a Rat’ (THCP.169–170); and, in particular, his wolves, foxes, birds and fish. Hughes, himself, told of a particularly influential dream/vision of a fox which caused him to abandon the study of English Literature, and turn, instead, to Anthropology and Archaeology. At University, trying to write “the last [English Literature] essay before the exams for Part I of the degree”, he “got bogged down” and toiled for days and long into the nights “but to no avail”. Still struggling over this essay until very late one night, and hating every minute of it, he began to dream. In his dream, he saw the door of his room open, “Then a head came round the edge of the door. It was about the height of a man’s head but clearly the head of a fox”. It was “at the same time, a skinny man and a fox walking erect on its hind legs” and it looked as if it has “just stepped out of a furnace. Every inch was roasted, smouldering, black–charred, split and bleeding”. This fox/man crossed the room to Hughes’ desk where his unfinished essay lay and leaving a bloody hand–print on it said, “You have to stop this. You’re destroying us”. This was the last such essay that Hughes wrote³⁵.

Both Faas and Heilpern record similar incidents which reflect the importance that Hughes places on his dreams³⁶. Plath, too, seems to be drawing on personal experience in her story, ‘The Wishing Box’, wherein a dreamless wife grows jealous of her husband’s nightly dream life. Plath’s fictional husband not only reflects Hughes’ own particular activities and interests, he also accepts his dreams “as if they were really an

integral part of his waking experience” and interestingly, in her poem, ‘Shrike’, Plath has a jealous “earth-wife” take bloody revenge on her errant, dream-enchanted husband³⁷.

The most important evidence of the dream origins of some of Hughes’ work, however, comes from the poet himself. He described his play, *The Wound*, which was first broadcast by the BBC in February 1962, as being based on a dream which he dreamed twice. Waking up in between, and which he subsequently wrote down, “managing to get the main thread and most of the episodes”³⁸. Similarly, parts of a play which was based on a recurring dream were broadcast by the BBC on 22 November 1965, and an expanded fragment of this play was later published as a poem entitled, ‘The Brother’s Dream’. In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes rewrote the poem ‘Ballad from a Fairy Tale’ (THCP.171), which was based on a recurrent dream, as ‘The Angel’ (THCP.492). There, it is of great importance to the regenerative theme in *Remains of Elmet*³⁹.

Music, too, is a central element of the shamanic seance and, as a preliminary to ecstatic flight, the shaman summons guiding spirits with rhythmic drumming on a magic drum. This instrument is made of wood from the ‘cosmic’ tree and it is given a life of its own in special anointing ceremonies. Shutting the animal guide or guides in this drum, the shaman flies to the Otherworld, often using the drum as his vehicle⁴⁰. In Hughes’ work, animals frequently functioned as summoning spirits through which Hughes’ inner powers, his poetic and visionary abilities, were tapped and released. Using the rhythms of poetry as his drum, he enclosed their ‘spirit’ within the poems’ framework and ‘flew’ through his poetry into the spirit realm. As the shaman who knew the road, he had the ability to escort the ‘soul’ of his reader on this journey, and he did this by using the poetic energy which he created to arouse the interest, emotions and imagination of his reader. He directed the course of these, to some extent, through the structures of the poem itself – his subject matter, images, words, rhythms and word patterns – all of which expressed, at the same time, his own meaning and intentions.

Through the imaginative and the musical power of his poetry, Hughes made repeated attempts to fly to the Source and return with healing energies: and the processes of death and rebirth, dissolution and renewal, which are the essence of the shamanic journey and of the world of Nature, are fundamental in his work. It is these processes, and the Universal Energies which drive them, which provided Hughes with his themes and subjects and they were, also, an integral part of his own questing journey towards self-knowledge, unity and ‘grace’.

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Starting the Journey

If poetry was the means by which Hughes sought to contact the Energies, then myth was frequently the framework within which he sought to control them. In his two essays on 'Myth and Education', he not only wrote of imagination as the human faculty which "embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit" (ME-2.92), but also of the way in which traditional myths and legends work on the imagination through "the brain's fundamental genius for metaphor"(ME-2.94). His description of this process was speculative but cogent. The brain, he suggested

uses the pattern of one set of images to organise quite a different set. It uses one image, with slight variations, as an image for related and yet different and otherwise image-less meanings.

In this way, the simple tale of a beggar and the princess begins to transmit intuitions of psychological, perhaps spiritual, states and relationships. What began as an idle reading of a fairy tale ends, by simple natural activity of the imagination, as a rich perception of values of feeling, emotion and spirit which would otherwise have remained unconscious and language less. The inner struggle of worlds, which is not necessarily a violent and terrible affair, though at bottom it often is, is suddenly given the perfect formula for the terms of a truce. A simple tale, told at the right moment, transforms a person's life with the order its pattern brings to incoherent energies.

And while its pattern proliferates in every direction through all levels of consciousness, its images are working too. (ME-2.94).

Myths and legends, then, are powerful tools through which the storytelling poet can influence the consciousness of others: and the commonality of their basic pattern ideally suits the quest for healing mana which Hughes, as poet/shaman, was undertaking in his work 1.

One further aspect of traditional epic stories which was of importance to Hughes, was their educative value. As in any true healing process, the nature and cause of the sickness have first to be identified, then removed. So, the traditional stories tell of the trials and difficulties which the shaman or hero must undergo before reaching his or her goal, and they describe the methods used to overcome these. The stories are characteristically worldly, making it easy for the reader to identify with the hero or heroine, but there is usually moral purpose in their theme. Hughes cited Plato as an authority on the use of myth and legend in education, but it is more significant that he refers to the Sufi tradition of using simple stories for purposes of spiritual enlightenment, and to the mystical techniques of certain Hermetic magicians who use special stories to develop their magical and mystical abilities (ME-1.62). Whilst Plato's views clearly influenced Hughes' thinking, it was the rich imaginative scope of Sufi and Hermetic methods that is most strongly reflected in his work.

In Hughes' earliest poetry, the epic theme of the shamanic/heroic journey is expressed in its most basic form in the eternal death/rebirth cycles of Nature. There is no suggestion, however, that humanity might benefit from the renewing energies. Instead, the temporal, human world is set alongside that of Nature which, unlike ours, was "there yesterday and the world before yesterday" ('Mountains' (THCP.176), and we are seen to be cut-off from its mysteries by our "Braggart-browed complacency" ('Egg-Head' (HIR.34)) and pride.

In *Lupercal*, in his children's stories, and in individual pieces of work, such as his verse-play, *The Difficulties of a Bridegroom*² (which resulted from Hughes' interest in the 15th century alchemical text *The Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*)³, there is evidence of Hughes' early use of mythological and traditional stories. His first published sequence of poems to be structured around the mythological theme of the epic journey, however, was *Crow*, which was published in 1970.

In *Crow*, for the first time, Hughes wrote a poetic sequence which combined his exploration of suppressed natural energies with the theme of the heroic quest. He described the poems in the published work as being part of a "vast folk epic"⁴, and the folk-tale origins of the sequence are important, because they show the deliberate choice of an epic framework for this poetic adventure in which Hughes intended to concentrate on language, music and style. This epic framework was to have been Hughes' means of controlling the Energies, but in some ways it apparently failed to do so. As he told Faas:

The story behind *Crow* brought me to the point where the poems arrived naturally, precipitated themselves naturally. In a way the whole adventure was a machinery I designed gradually to produce the poems until it produced them of its own accord.... There was no planning in the poems themselves. Most of them were revealing to me as I wrote them and they usually wrote themselves quite rapidly. With several of them that now seem ordinary enough I had the sensation of having done something taboo and very horrible after I had written them ⁵.

Crow Cover

In other respects, Hughes' use of traditional material was rather more successful. Hughes' *Crow* comes complete with all the mythological and folkloric accretions which crows have gathered through their long existence and, of course, all the natural characteristics of the crow species. He is the first of the Everyman figures to appear in Hughes' poetic sequences, and the first to undertake the questing journey. Hughes calls him "the shadow of man. He's a man to correct man, but of course he's not a man, he's a crow"⁶, and his relationship to Man is that of Trickster, or Fool, about whom Alan Garner wrote:

If we take the elements from which our emotions are built and give them separate names such as Mother, Hero, Father, King, Child, Queen, the element that I think marks most of us is that of the Fool. It is where our humanity lies. For the Fool is the advocate of uncertainty: he is at once creator and destroyer, bringer of help and harm. He draws

a boundary for chaos. So that we can make sense of the rest. He is the shadow that shapes the light He is comical, grotesque, stupid, cunning, ambiguous. He is sometimes part animal, and always part something else. The something else is what is so special. He is the dawning godhead in Man 7.

The Fool has a long history in folk-tale and literature. He is the trickster of Native American folk-tales, and the “vulgar person” of Greek tragedy who was used by poets, according to Milton, to mix “Comic stuff with Tragic sadness and gravity ... which by all judicious hath bin counted absurd”⁸. He is the ordinary human, summoned by a higher authority to learn the error of his ways, as in the medieval morality plays and in *Everyman*. And he is the pilgrim, searching for enlightenment, as in Bunyas’ *Pilgrim’s Progress*.

The embryonic spiritual element in the character of the Fool was as important to Hughes’ purposes in *Crow* as are *Crow*’s human characteristics, for his aim was spiritual enlightenment and healing. But, although *Crow* shares the mythological totemic attributes of his species, he has too atavistic and primitive a nature for much spiritual progress to be made. Despite this, within the folk-tale ‘machinery’ of the sequence Hughes developed a simple and powerful style which communicated with the subconscious energies so well that many readers found the *Crow* poems unacceptably disturbing.

Hughes himself seemed to feel that the *Crow* sequence had taken him too far, too fast. He seemed to have little control over the poems, and he described the experience as like “putting [himself] through a process”. When asked by Faas if he felt the process had come to completion, he said: “In a way I think I projected too far into the future. I’d like to get the rest of it. But maybe it will take a different form”⁹.

Consequently, he returned to the attempt to handle the natural energies in poetic, mythological, death/rebirth sequences such as *Cave Bird*, *Gaudete*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River*, which are as different from each other as they are from *Crow*.

* * * * *

Cave Birds Cover Cover

Three years were to elapse between the publication of *Crow* (1970) and the writing of the first *Cave Birds* poems which, according to Sagar, date from 1973 (see Appendix I). During this time Hughes had the opportunity to experience, at first hand, the powerful way in which mythology could be combined with sound and with light to create a pathway for the subconscious energies in Man. This experience, which came through his involvement with *Orghast*, expanded, strengthened and confirmed many of the strongly held beliefs which were fundamental to the purpose of Hughes’ writing. It is interesting, therefore, to look more closely at this phase of Hughes’ life and work.

In 1971, Hughes joined Peter Brook’s newly established ‘Centre for Theatre Research’ in an expedition to Persia where they had been invited to perform at the

Shiraz–Persepolis Festival of Arts. Hughes was to write the language for an experimental drama which Brook intended to perform in Persia, and through which he was hoping to discover a mode of theatrical communication which was independent of any particular language.

As the basic theme for the performance, Brook was drawn towards the myth of Prometheus. Prometheus was a Titan whose gift of fire to the human race has been symbolically equated with the gift of language, but his story also provided a connection with the Manichean myths of opposing forces of Darkness and Light, God and Man, which preoccupied Brook at that time. These myths were central to the exercises which Brook's company had been doing for several months using Calderon's Spanish masterpiece, *La Vida Es Sueno*, and a modern play by Peter Handke, *Kaspar*, as source material.

Brook's views on the modern relevance of Manichean themes in which light is opposed and imprisoned by darkness, and where good and evil, love and hate, are in constant conflict, were ones which chimed with Hughes' own beliefs in the artificiality of such dualism. Also, Hughes had worked before with several of Brook's actors in experiments on the use of sound for expression and communication. From his early interest in the musical components of poetry, which he had once described for children as dance and song in words which "engage the deepest roots of our minds, and carry poet's words down into our depths"¹⁰, Hughes had become "interested in the possibilities of a language of tones and sounds, without specific conceptual or perceptual meaning"¹¹.

Whilst making a translation of Seneca's *Oedipus* for Brook's company in 1968, Hughes had introduced the actors to the sound of primitive song, and to anthropological recordings of Tibetan Buddhist monks who used parts of their bodies as the source of different resonant sounds¹². Brook's production of *Oedipus*, using Hughes' translation, had been enormously successful. Writing of it in his book about Peter Brook, J.C Trewin noted that its impact had been achieved to a great extent by focusing attention "on the spoken words, their tones and rhythms". He described the vocal devices, humming, chanting and drumming, which, combined with innovative staging in which lighting, intensified the atmosphere so that the audience "were aware only of the strong assault upon the nerves and senses". Orghast, he wrote,

was to be an extension of the work undertaken in *Oedipus* in stretching conventional theatre to the limits, in accordance with Brook's principle that if the need for a true contact with a sacred invisibility through theatre still exists, then all possible vehicles must be re-examined¹³.

Hughes' task, in *Orghast*, was to find sounds which would embody the myth and would express the actors' thoughts, feelings and intentions in a vocal form which was universally intelligible. Describing this process to Ossia Trilling, Hughes said:

The main point was to create a language which would be precise in itself and yet act as an invitation to this other hidden, or lost world, which is the world which we said we

wanted to explore: a language that would deal with precision, and in a completely intelligible way, with a world that is, in a way, closed to direct, rational analysis 14.

Paraphrasing Hughes' words from an interview conducted at Persepolis, Peter Wilson wrote:

The purpose of Orghast, play and language, is an inner transformation, an opening to a lost world which is the chosen realm of the I.C.T.R. [Brook's International Centre for Theatre Research]. Music is already such a language, precise and mysterious. Like music, Orghast is at no point meant to engage the cerebration which cuts us off from this deeper world. Music is more sophisticated and evolved, however; imagine music buried for 5000 years, decayed back to its sources, then unearthed: this is the ideal of Orghast 44.

In essence, the task which Hughes was undertaking was an attempt to use music and language to link the inner and outer worlds of a group of people. It was an attempt to create a shared experience of dramatic intensity (perhaps ecstasy) through the natural energies; an "attempt to find the primal impulse in the sound of a word"15 . At the same time, it was an attempt to use his own poetic, 'Apollonian' energies, in the form of language, to shape and control the 'Dionysian' elements and to reconcile the energies into a creative unity.

The language which Hughes invented was called 'Orghast' (as was the play), and it consisted of rhythmic sounds which had specific meanings but which were flexible in pronunciation. Hughes described it as "creating the sensation of a half-barbaric world"16, an atmosphere which particularly suited the mythical themes for which it was used and the surroundings in which it would be heard. It had its own limited grammatical structure and the invented words were fished "out of the air"17 by Hughes in an intuitive search for a sound which exactly fitted what he wanted to express. Yet, it remained an essentially empirical language in which the actors experimented with the sound and mode of utterance of each word before it attained its final form.

The language of Orghast, the group found, "worked best in rhythmic exchanges"18, and, like poetry, Hughes envisaged it as being closely related to music in its communicative powers. Asked if there would eventually be a dictionary for Orghast, he replied: "Where is the dictionary of music? There is one – in your body"19.

In explication of his views, he told Anthony Smith (the group's official chronicler) how he saw the musical elements of language as functioning in this effort to establish a common basis for communication between people of disparate cultures:

The deeper into language one goes, the less visual/conceptual its imagery, and the more audial/visceral/muscular its system of tensions.... the deeper into language one goes, the more dominated it becomes by purely musical modes, and the more dramatic it becomes – the more unified with total states of being and with the expressiveness of physical action20.

In performance, the connection with music was so close that Smith described Peter Brook as 'conducting' the Chorus during rehearsal: "punching the air to get a rhythm, beckoning in new voices or sections, calming, invigorating", asking for "patterns of sound", and demanding "vocal experiment" and a "flowing tempo", as for an opera or a musical performance²¹. Ultimately, however, Orghast alone could not convey all that Brook and Hughes wanted in the dramatic performance, so Latin, Greek, and an ancient Zoroastrian language called 'Avesta', were also used. The final combination was described by Brook as "a conscious attempt to marry myth and poetry [in a] musical language which communicated over and above intellectual understanding"²².

Orghast, in performance, was to be a combination of a language which 'metaphorically' magnified the relationship between sounds and feelings²³, and dramatic action which incorporated movement, setting and lighting. For all this, it was necessary to Brook and Hughes that they should start work from some common basis out of which universally understood patterns, independent of specific cultural contexts, might be derived. In a BBC interview Brook commented:

We naturally start with what we know. So Ted and I started work, not from a void, in which we tried to invent pure pattern[sic]. The starting-point for both of us was a concrete reference, and that was the image and the myth of Prometheus²⁴.

For Hughes, another important reason for incorporating myth in Orghast was his belief in the need for controls in any evocation of the Universal Energies. He was aware that mythology had been a valued part of the ritual and dogma traditionally employed to control spiritual energies. As he explained to Faas:

In the old world God and divine power were invoked at any cost – life seemed worthless without them. In the present world we dare not invoke them – we wouldn't know how to use them or stop them destroying us. We have settled for the minimum practical energy and illumination – anything bigger introduces problems, the demons get hold of it. This is the psychological stupidity, the ineptitude, of the rigid rationalist outlook – it's a form of hubris, and we're paying the traditional price. If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control – rituals, the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one²⁵.

In addition, there was Hughes' belief that mythology presents us with an analogy for our inner conflicts, and that it can provide a vehicle for the resolution of those conflicts.

Greek mythology, in particular, Hughes described as presenting "a working anatomy of our physical life in a very complete and profound way"²⁶, but he believed that all mythology allows us to make an imaginative identification with its heroes and, thereby, to participate in their attempts at reconciliation of the subconscious and conscious elements of the human personality. Through the imagination, we can vicariously share the heroic deeds, struggles and torments of the mythological hero, whose actions

objectify the inner turmoils of the human psyche: in so doing, we gain valuable insight into our own condition. Discussing the relevance of mythology in education, Hughes wrote:

the real problem comes from the fact that [our] outer world and inner world are interdependent at every moment. We are simply the locus of their collision. Two worlds, with mutually contradictory laws, or laws that seem to us to be so, colliding afresh every second, struggling for peaceful coexistence. And whether we like it or not our life is what we are able to make of that collision and struggle.

So what we need, evidently, is a faculty that embraces both worlds simultaneously. A large flexible grasp, an inner vision which holds wide open, like a great theatre, the arena of contention, and which pays equal respects to both sides. Which keeps faith, as Goethe says, with the world of things and the world of spirits equally (ME-2.91).

This faculty is the imagination, and Hughes goes on to say that the work of great artists is an imaginative restatement of those universal laws which reconcile the inner and outer worlds:

The myths and legends which Plato proposed as the ideal educational material for his young citizens, can be seen as large-scale accounts of negotiations between the powers of the inner world and the stubborn conditions of the outer world, under which ordinary men and women live. They are immense and at the same time highly detailed sketches of the possibilities of understanding and reconciling the two ... they were originally the genuine projection of genuine understanding. They were tribal dreams of the highest order of inspiration and truth, at their best (ME-2.92).

So, the choice of the Prometheus myth as a starting point for Orghast might be expected to have two important results. Firstly, the tribal dream incorporated in the story would strike chords of recognition in the audience which would harmonise with the thoughts and feelings communicated through the new language; secondly, it would provide a ritual by means of which the energies released in the audience would be guided and controlled.

As a tribal myth, the Prometheus story with its theme of defiance and punishment²⁷ was particularly pertinent to the early Greek people, since they lived in a society which was beginning to put the interest of the State above that of individuals. Moral responsibility, in this society, was based on notions of perfectibility through the use of Man's rational powers. This was epitomised by Plato's concept of the Ideal State ruled by philosopher-guardians, and it expressed itself in the refinements of the Classical arts. Along with the increased emphasis on rational powers, came a need to suppress the instinctive, individual, 'animal' side of human nature, (which Prometheus' cunning and trickery exemplified). So began a duality and conflict within human beings which exists to the present day. "The Platonic system of ideas", Hughes wrote, "has in one way or another dominated the mental life of the Western world ever since" (ME-2.77). With the increased emphasis on rational objectivity, the inner life has come to be

regarded as a suspect source of information:

In the end, since all our attention from birth has been narrowed into that outward beam, we come to regard our body as no more than a somewhat stupid vehicle ... The body, with its spirits, is the antennae of all perceptions, the receiving aerial for all wavelengths. But we are disconnected. The exclusiveness of our objective eye, the very strength and brilliance of our objective intelligence, suddenly turns into stupidity – of the most rigid and suicidal kind (ME–2.87).

Prometheus is a being torn between his sympathy for Earth's human creatures and his loyalty to the ruling gods. In him are combined both human and god-like qualities, and his attempt to reconcile their conflicting interests leads him to a state of perpetual torment. From the point of view of the tribal dream, Prometheus not only embodies Man's rational/instinctive dilemma, he is a super-human figure who is able to challenge the power of the gods and who acts as a scapegoat on whom they take their revenge. Prometheus is, in fact, the archetype hero who willingly takes personal risks and challenges established limits in the fight for individual freedom. His punishment, as Nietzsche pointed out, is seen as a necessary and just consequence of his challenge to the gods: a parallel to the suffering Man must undergo in any attempts to alter and control his own destiny²⁸.

Nietzsche's analysis of the Prometheus myth in terms of a conflict between the subconscious Dionysian energies and the rational, self-controlling, Apollonian energies, emphasised the need to reconcile these two elements of the human personality. Too much reliance on Apollonian energies, Nietzsche saw as leading to rigidity and coldness; too much freedom for the Dionysian impulse to a "witches brew" of sensuality and cruelty. "The conjoint Dionysian and Apollonian nature might", wrote Nietzsche, "be thus expressed in an abstract formula: 'Whatever exists is alike just and unjust, and in both cases equally justified'"²⁹. The similarity between Nietzsche's views on myth and Hughes' description of it as "the realm of management between our ordinary mind and our deepest life"³⁰, is readily apparent. And the necessity, attested to by both, of interaction between subconscious and conscious energies is summed up by William Blake's parable: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom" (MHH.PI.1:3).

Hughes' adaptation of the Prometheus myth in *Orghast*, then, was a further attempt to utilise universally recognisable patterns as a means of communication at a sub-conscious level. It is interesting, in the light of Hughes' stated intentions about *Orghast*, to note that the anthropologist, Levi-Strauss, whose work Hughes knew, described "how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of it", and wrote of "the characteristic that myth and music share of both being languages which in their different ways transcend articulate expression, while at the same time – like articulate speech, but unlike painting – require a temporal dimension in which to unfold"³¹.

During rehearsals for *Orghast*, the basic Prometheus myth underwent many changes. New characters and actions were invented, and ideas from Calderon, Handel's *Kaspar*, Manichean beliefs, folklore and many other sources were incorporated. In the end,

however, there was a “withering away of the forms themselves, of the details. of the narrative, of the anecdotal side of these myths, [which] led just as naturally to the attempt to look at what lay beneath”³².

Finally, Orghast expressed some of Hughes’ most basic beliefs about the conflict between Man and Nature, and about the healing power of the natural energies, as can be seen from this summary which he made of Part I:

In abstract, it is the story of the crime against material nature, the Creatress, source of life and light, by the Violator, the mental tyrant, Holdfast, and her revenge. The first plan of her revenge is on the animal level, and it fails, because on the animal level the situation is unalterable, or rather inevitably reproduces itself; the second plan is on the truly human level, and it succeeds, transcending the conflict by creating a being which, like Prometheus ... includes the elemental opposites, and in whom the collision and pain become illumination, because it is the true account ³³.

One further crucial component of the dramatic experiment at Persepolis was Peter Brook’s sensitivity to the effect of the setting in which the drama was to take place. As an experienced theatrical director, Brook was well aware that a close relationship exists between a performance and its setting. Smith reports that it was one of Brook’s cardinal principles for the Centre that it should “redefine the notion of a touring company, wherever it travels, by opening its work to the influences of the place it works in”³⁴.

It was only after visiting Persepolis that Brook was convinced that his ICTR company could do some work there.

The city of Persepolis was built by the Persian king, Darius I, between 512 and 494 BC, and burned to the ground by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. The ruins of its palaces lie close beneath the steep north face of Mount Kuh-i-Rehmat into which have been excavated the tombs of two Persian kings, worshippers of Ahura Mazda the sun god. Six miles from Persepolis, at Naqsh-e Rostam, are three more royal tombs, again carved into a towering cliff and decorated with carved figures and symbols of sun and fire worship. After an initial reconnaissance of all three sites, Brook and his company, impressed by the awesome atmosphere and the magnificent natural acoustics of the mountain tombs, chose two of these as settings for their performance. It was decided that the first part of Orghast would be performed on a stage-like platform half-way up the cliff-face in front of the tomb of Artaxerxes II, overlooking the ruins of Persepolis. Part II would take place at Naqsh-e Rostam, using the whole of the open piece of ground in front of the royal tombs together with the tombs and the cliff-face itself. The audience would need to move around to follow the action which would be a sort of “walking show for cast and mass audience, unfolding the tombs and rock shelves as a series of epic backdrops”³⁵.

Enthusiasm for the setting was high, and Brook spoke in glowing terms of the powerful atmosphere of the ruins, describing them as a place where “the past is no longer something that once was, but a present experience”. Elaborating on this, he continued:

Persepolis has a quality that you can taste on the tongue. It's not just a collection of stones. One can sense that the men who built Persepolis chose with care and accuracy the spot where they were building and understood why they were making certain proportions, what the relation of brilliant sun and dark shadow was: and although Persepolis has fallen into ruin, the ruin is not so complete, that the central form is lost, so that in Persepolis there is still a life ... a mysterious, impalpable life, which one can only talk about in a rather abstract manner 36.

In these sites, which had been skilfully chosen by Persian kings for qualities of natural illumination suited to their sun-worshipping religious rituals, Brook chose to rely almost entirely on the use of sun, fire, and naturally created areas of light and darkness for the performances of Orghast. Part I was played at dusk and just after sunset: Part II at dawn. The whole became a ritual combination of light and music as Hughes' version of the theft of fire from the gods unfolded in the natural grandeur of the setting. Performers were silhouetted against the skyline, emerged from the darkness of tomb-mouths and rock crevices, and carried burning torches to illuminate the scene or to perform symbolic acts. Bowls of fire lit the pathways from the tombs down to Persepolis and, at Naqsh-e Rostam, great blazes edged the cliff-tops, and the Chorus carried flambeaux from place to place until the fires were extinguished and the sun rose behind the tomb of Xerxes.

Using every means at their disposal, Hughes and Brook set out to break down the rational barriers erected by the 'mental tyrant, Holdfast', first, in each member of Brook's company through constant exercises and experiment, then, through the performance of Orghast, in each member of the audience. Their aim was to re-establish contact, however tenuous, with the imaginative, creative faculties: to open the mind and to extend the vision. The symbolism of illumination through fire, inherent in the Prometheus myth and in the historical atmosphere of Persepolis, was a suitable metaphor for their efforts, just as the whole performance resembled a ritual purification.

Neither Hughes, nor Brook, expected the task to be easy. Orghast, for Brook, was one more experiment in his years of research into the 'holy' nature of theatre, his search for "the springs of drama itself"³⁷, and his attempts to recreate the power which early magico-religious drama seems to have contained. For Hughes, Orghast was one more route by which the natural energies could be channelled into the sterility of the modern world, where "the story of the mind exiled from nature is the story of western man"³⁸.

Predictably, reactions to the performances at Persepolis varied. Critics, locked into lifelong habits of rigid rational analysis, complained that Brook and Hughes had "erected a verbal blockade" ³⁹; that there was no "intelligible plan"⁴⁰; and that the whole thing was "a striking example of a movement in the theatre towards mystification" ⁴¹. Yet, as Irving Wardle of The Sunday Times pointed out in a slightly different context, "such arguments, for or against, miss the point by erecting an intellectual barricade against a work intended to awaken the pre-logical faculties and conjure buried music out of the earth" ⁴². More frequently, Orghast was described as a beautiful, impressive and

breathhtaking spectacle. "Man came as close as he possibly can... to creating sacred ritual without actual instruction from heaven", wrote one observer, and the critic of the Financial Times declared that "the playgoer who has entered deeply into Orghast has passed through fire, and can never be the same again" 43.

If this was true for the audience, then it was also true for those involved in the production. Orghast provided Hughes with valuable insights into the summoning and control of the Universal Energies, as well as practical experience of the difficulties which would inevitably confront him in his attempts to break down rational and intellectual barriers. Such insights and experience confirmed his faith in myth, ritual, music and poetry as effective tools in his task of reintegrating our inner and outer worlds, and the dramatic experience he had undergone began to shape his work, giving it a broader scale and greater impact than anything he had attempted before.

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The Perfectibility of Man

Hughes' experience with Orghast not only influenced the structure and development of the poetic sequence, *Cave Birds*, which was soon to follow, it also brought new life to ideas Hughes had begun work on earlier but had, for various reasons, abandoned.

The first of these works to be completed was *Season Songs* – a sequence of poems based on *Autumn Songs for Children's Voices*, five poems which were written for the Harvest Festival at Little Missenden in 1968. *Season Songs* Cover Additional poems for this sequence were written during the same period as *Gaudete* and *Cave Birds*, and in 1974 it appeared as a Rainbow Press limited edition entitled, *Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter*. In it, with the cyclical destructive/re-creative energies of Nature as his theme, Hughes again attempted to communicate his unifying vision simply and directly to his readers. Introducing a reading from it on the BBC, Hughes said:

My only concern was to stay close to simple observation, directing my reader's attention to things which had interested me and keeping myself within hearing of children 1.

His intention was that the poems should be accessible to children but able to speak to adults, too. The result, as Gifford and Roberts noted, reflected "far more concentrated attention and imaginative activity" than is apparent in any of his previous work for children, and that the "freedom and expansiveness" of Hughes' tone was apparent,

also, in the other work he was producing at that time². Looking at *Season Songs* in relation to Hughes' other work, Keith Cushman noted Hughes' "renewed vision of life's sacredness and harmony", which he described as "a path back towards life and wholeness of being" from the "nihilistic impasse" to which *Crow* and *Prometheus on His Crag* appeared to lead³.

A second work to which Hughes returned at this time, was the story of the Reverend Lumb, which he had first written as a film script for a Swedish director between 1962 and 1964. In 1971, prompted by a series of "dreams connected with the mythopoeic narrative behind *Crow*"⁴. Hughes began to rewrite Lumb's story. The result was *Gaudete* and, in reply to a query from Faas, Hughes wrote:

Gaudete obviously is connected to *Crow*, *Crow* in full, with big developments, would be the yolk, and *Gaudete* would be the shell. I projected the life of Lumb in the underworld, and it became entangled with *Crow*, and the episodes became like real events of which the *Gaudete* events are the shadow on the wall in the cave⁵.

The link between *Gaudete* and *Crow*, and the theme of the mythical, transforming journey through the Underworld, show the persistence of Hughes' poetic attempts to examine and to heal the divisions in our world. His theatrical experiences with *Orghast*, meanwhile, had brought increased vividness and focus to this work, thereby enhancing its cinematic qualities and producing "pictures and soundtrack" which so powerfully disturbed some critics that they vehemently attacked Hughes for excessive bloodiness and violence, altogether missing the balancing harmony and beauty of the final scenes and poems⁶.

Unfortunately, few readers understood what Hughes was attempting in *Gaudete*, and even those critics who were favourably disposed towards him found the sequence difficult and perplexing. Julian Symons, reviewer for *The Sunday Times*, described *Gaudete* as "a very strange work indeed". Having explained some of his puzzlement, he wrote:

It is a pity that the poem should be so obscure, not passage by passage, but in its ultimate meaning.... But whatever the poem finally means, its eloquence, passion and power are unmistakable. It is the most impressive single work produced by an English poet in this decade⁷.

This prompted another reviewer, Edwin Brock, to accuse him pithily of contradicting himself. Brock, apparently, had no difficulty in understanding what *Gaudete* was about. For him, it was simply the story of "the Reverend Nicholas Lumb fucking his parishioners". He chose to deal with only part of the text and to ignore the Epigraphs and Hughes' Argument, Prologue and Epilogue: he conceded that a lot of the text was "beautifully written"; but he concluded that "*Gaudete* could well find a place in English Literature as a monument to the misuse of talent"⁸. Unfortunately, he was not alone in this assessment.

Other reviewers suggested that *Gaudete* was an “attempt to discover the point where good and evil meet” 9; that it was a “religious polemic” in “Yorkshire Gothic” manner 10(13); and that it was a story “of the Polanski type” 11.

It was left to those who had made a close study of Hughes’ work over a number of years (Sagar, Hirschberg, and Gifford and Roberts, for example) to elucidate the underlying themes of reconciliation with the Goddess; of the poet’s negotiations with his own inner world which, as Hughes had written elsewhere, is the “dehumanised”; inner world of modern Man – “elemental, chaotic, continually more primitive and beyond our control ... a place of demons” (ME-2.90); and of his shamanic attempt to re-establish communication between our dislocated inner and outer worlds. Belatedly, John Bayley, in an obituary essay for Hughes in *The Times Literary Supplement* (13 Nov. 1998), wrote that he found *Gaudete* “not only an astonishingly vivid mystical drama, but an outburst of manic happiness which reminded [him] of Christopher Smart and his *Song of David*”.

Those who still object to the inner vision which Hughes presents in *Gaudete* (and few readers find it altogether acceptable) are behaving just as he once predicted when he wrote:

If we do manage to catch a glimpse of our inner selves, we recognise it with horror – it is an animal crawling and decomposing in a hell. We refuse to own it (ME-2.90).

However, despite the careful analyses of Sagar, Hirschberg, and Gifford and Roberts, the perplexities which so troubled the critics still prevail. Gifford and Roberts remarked that even “the most generous reading cannot evade the judgement that certain crucial weaknesses obscure the meaning of the narrative itself”. And Hughes, himself, was far from regarding *Gaudete* as completely satisfactory. By August 1977, shortly after the Platform Performance readings of *Gaudete* at the National Theatre in London, he had, apparently, come to feel that “the entire venture had turned into a *deja vu* experience pointing backwards rather than towards a conclusion” 12.

Nonetheless, his progress in *Gaudete* was noted. Faas saw *Gaudete* as “an unprecedented new stage in Hughes’ artistic development” 13, and J.M. Newton, wrote that “in all the compellingness of *Gaudete* there is an extraordinary freedom” as if “something has come free in [Hughes]” 14(17). Newton found, too, a “terrific equanimity” in the sequence – “the impression that everything in the world of the tale is at once terrible and beautiful and all of it, in the end, one” – words which echo Hughes’ own comments on “the ‘horror’ within the created ‘glory’ ... as our common humanity undergoes it”, and the healing ability of *mana* which, like music, connects, “as it seems, everything to everything, and everything to the source of itself” 15.

Gaudete, in terms of Hughes’ own poetic quest, represented his first lengthy foray into the perilous woods of the human subconscious; his first prolonged confrontation with the most powerful natural energies; and his own vicarious journey through the bloody trials, the degradation and the ultimate death and spiritual rebirth to which the reverend

Lumb is subjected. Lumb, like Hughes' other Everyman heroes, exists at first in a state of complacency and blindness. He "has no idea where he is going" (G.11:3) but he is confident that he will find "and decision" (G.11:9) within himself. Such, is normal human arrogance and folly. But the bloody nature of Lumb's story, the cinematographic distancing devices which Hughes employed to control its energies, the actions of Lumb's changeling double, and the complex structure of myth and fantasy which Hughes wove, prevent us from understanding and identifying with his hero. And because we see no link between his experiences and our own, we cannot learn from them. In the end, despite Lumb's sacred, healing journey to the underworld, despite the supernatural events which surround his eventual return and the beauty of the hymns and prayers he brings with him, Lumb, for the reader, fails to achieve heroic status.

The third, and perhaps the most carefully structured, dramatically balanced, and emotionally satisfying work to follow *Orghast*, was *Cave Birds*. In it, Hughes dealt again with the perennial dualism of human nature in a dramatic and imaginative way. The sequence represents one more "raid on the inarticulate", and it is a further expression of Hughes' faith in the magical power of poetry "to make things happen the way you want them to happen"¹⁶.

In the notes Hughes wrote for the Ilkley Festival performance of *Cave Birds*, he called it "A mystery play, of sorts"¹⁷. Building on his earlier experiences with *Orghast*, and drawing on the great tradition of mystery and morality plays which still exists in his native Yorkshire, he combined musical and dramatic effects in a story which tells of the spiritual transformation of a protagonist who shares many of the qualities of Lumb, Prometheus and Crow. This protagonist is arrogant, egocentric and destructive. He defies the gods and suffers in consequence of this, and he is blind to his own condition. Yet, through the god-like component of his nature, he is capable of redemption. Above all, he is a familiar hero with human characteristics; a figure with which both Hughes and his readers can identify and whose adventures we can imaginatively share.

The first tentative steps towards the *Cave Birds* journey can be traced in the twenty-one poems of 'Prometheus on his Crag' (THCP.285–296) which were written at the time of Hughes' involvement with *Orghast*. Prometheus, as Nietzsche pointed out, is a scapegoat¹⁸. Prometheus covers he dares, whilst in human form, to challenge the Gods on Man's behalf and he suffers the inevitable punishment for his deeds. Prometheus is also a Trickster – an amoral being whose actions are governed by impulse and who is both "creator and destroyer giver and negator, ... who dupes others and is always duped himself"¹⁹.

As such, Prometheus is directly related to Crow. Yet, although he shares many of Crow's brash, daring, anti-authoritarian characteristics he, unlike Crow, has the human potential to understand and evaluate the causes and results of his actions.

Because Prometheus is related to the Titans, who were born of the mating of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven), he embodies the whole range of human and godlike qualities, good and bad. For Hughes, this made him an ideal figure with which to

attempt to reconcile instinct with intellect and, thereby, to achieve understanding and wholeness. In a poetic recreation of Prometheus' plight, Hughes reiterated the ancient wisdom of many major religions, wisdom which is paralleled by the basic tenets of twentieth century Jungian psychology: in order to achieve release from his suffering, Prometheus must undergo a spiritual/psychic journey of self-examination, understanding and acceptance. Half human, "slung between heaven and earth", he is, (as Smith wrote, paraphrasing Hughes' own summary of the mythology behind Orghast), "fractured. He is the crossroads of eternal light and ecstasy, and temporal doom, pain, change and death. Conscious in eternity he has to live in time"²⁰. Poem by poem, Hughes' Prometheus progresses stage-by-stage from pride ("Am I an eagle?" – "he exults – like and eagle, and through suffering, until he begins to recognise and accept the vulture as his own daemon, his own dark energies, called in to being by his own "world's end shout".

He ponders this bird, questioning its meaning: was it his tormentor, his punishment for his theft of fire? Was it "the earth's enlightenment – / Was he an uninitiated infant / Mutilated towards alignment?" Or was it "his anti-self"? Only when he sees that it may be "the Helper / coming again to pick at the crucial knot / of all his bonds"(THCP.296), does he begin to understand and "the mother", Earth, relents. In a poem filled with imagery which presages that of 'The Owl Flower' in Cave Birds, Hughes describes the moment of illumination as one of glorious release:

And Prometheus eases free.

He sways to his stature

And balances. And treads

On the dusty peacock film where the world floats (THCP.296).

The image of the peacock is an alchemical image of change and rebirth. And it is Prometheus's new stature and balance which are essential to the process of enlightenment. Through his suffering, Prometheus finally achieves an understanding which allows him to surmount his Earthly pride; and in this sequence Hughes again undertook a questing journey which was essentially one of painful self-discovery.

There is little that one can add to Keith Sagar's analysis of the Prometheus poems²¹, except to emphasise that Hughes shows cleverness, pride and complacency as being the cause of the torment suffered by both Prometheus and Mankind. The theft of fire from Zeus is achieved by Prometheus through trickery and cunning and with an arrogant disregard for the vulnerability of his own human form. It is this misuse of his knowledge and abilities which brings about his suffering, just as the misuse by Mankind of religion, spiritual energy (holy fire) and knowledge causes the chaos which Hughes captures in the surreal images of poem 6:

Below, among car-bumpers and shopping baskets

A monkey of voice, shuffling Tarot

For corpses and embryos, quotes Ecclesiastes

To the clock that talks backward (THCP.288)

Other experiences, besides Orghast, were to influence the development of Cave Birds. During the year which followed the performances of Orghast at Persepolis, Hughes continued to write for Brook's experimental theatre group. Working from his home in Devon, away from the mainstream of Brook's experimentation at the group's Paris centre, Hughes wrote over a hundred poems on which Brook's actors drew for inspiration in their exercises and improvisations²².

Brook's work at this time was beginning to reflect his idea of the theatre as an empty space which could be magically brought to life by the actors. His aim was to achieve maximum impact with the utmost simplicity of form and imagery. To this end, a year after the Shiraz Festival Brook took his group on a tour through Africa where, utilising natural open spaces or a square of carpet, the actors improvised performances for village audiences. Nothing about the performances was planned, nothing had been prepared. The only shared frame of reference between the actors was the experience of Orghast and a year's work with the poems which Hughes provided ²³.

Conference of the Birds

The twelfth century Sufi fable on which Hughes' poems were based was The Conference of the Birds, by the Persian poet, Farid ud-Din Attar. As an allegorical tale of a symbolic journey in search of wisdom and understanding, this fable was a felicitous choice for a group of actors embarked on a similar, though less symbolic, quest. For Hughes, the fable was important because the journey which the birds undertake in search of the Simurgh, the Great Bird – a symbol of God – is a shamanic journey. It is the heroic quest which Hughes believed to be "one of the main regenerating dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event"²⁴.

As such, it is the story of Prometheus in another form. And the allegorical theme and the story-telling pattern of the poem link it closely with both 'Prometheus on his Crag' and Cave Birds. Like all Sufi poetry, the story of The Conference of the Birds is full of hidden meanings. On one level it is simply the tale of the birds' search for a king: on another (as Attar makes clear) it is a guide for Man in his quest for spiritual truth. In the invocation which precedes the poem, Attar writes:

My friends! We are neighbours of one another: I wish to repeat my discourse to you day and night, so that you should not cease for a moment to long to set out in quest of Truth²⁵.

The heroic quest, however, is never easy and Attar's warnings of the difficulties of such a task are very clear. The invocation contains a caution for himself and his readers:

O my heart, if you wish to arrive at the beginning of understanding, walk carefully. To each atom there is a different door, and for each atom there is a different way which leads to the mysterious Being of whom I speak ²⁶.

And, with reference to the trials of such Biblical figures as Adam, Noah, Job and Christ, he writes:

After this, do you think it will be easy to arrive at a knowledge of spiritual things? It means no less than to die to everything.... O Holy Creator! Vivify my spirit! Believers and unbelievers are equally plunged in blood, and my head turns as the heavens 27.

For most of the birds in Attar's fable, the quest ends literally in death. Those few who do reach the sublime place, led by the Hoopoe who is "a messenger of the world invisible"²⁸, have learned to put aside all worldly concerns and have achieved complete humility. For them, finally, "a hundred curtains are drawn aside" and an amazing truth is revealed:

At last, in state of contemplation, they realised that they were the Simurgh and that the Simurgh was the thirty birds ... that they and the Simurgh were one and the same being²⁹

This is the paradox which lies at the heart of mystical teaching. It is essentially a belief in the perfectibility of Man, and it is what Eliot described in Four Quartets when he wrote that "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time"³⁰(³²).

The belief that all creatures carry God and the seeds of enlightenment within them is the fundamental tenet of Sufism, as it is of Hermeticism, and it is a belief which is essential to an understanding of the theme in Hughes' Cave Birds. Attar expresses this belief when he writes that "God is all, and things have only a nominal value; the world visible and the world invisible are only Himself"³¹.

Since Man is part of the world, we, too, are an expression of God. We, however, are more complex than other creatures, for we are capable of knowing the divine element within ourselves. Using allegory in the Sufi manner, Attar explains:

When the soul was joined to the body it was part of the all: never has there been so marvellous a talisman. The soul had a share of that which is high, and the body a share of that which is low; it was formed of a mixture of heavy clay and pure spirit. By this mixing, Man became the most astonishing of mysteries. We do not know nor do we understand so much as a little of our spirit ... Many know the surface of the ocean, but they understand nothing of the depths; and the visible world is the talisman which protects it. But this talisman of bodily obstacles will be broken at last. You will find the treasure when the talisman disappears: the soul will manifest itself when the body is laid aside. But your soul is another talisman; it is ... another substance In this vast ocean the world is an atom and the atom a world. Who knows which is of more value here, the cornelian or the pebble? 32.

There is much in Sufi philosophy which chimed with Hughes' own views about our position in the natural world. He always depicted human beings as part of that world, and his questioning of our assumption of superiority due to our rational abilities grew naturally from such a view. Hughes' graphic descriptions of the emergence of animal

appetites in humans as well as in other creatures, were, for him no more than a factual depiction of Nature. It is such descriptions which have been responsible for much of the criticism of violence which has been levelled against Hughes, yet to deny the existence of violence in ourselves (or in nature) he regarded as foolish and hypocritical – as a denial and suppression of the natural energies.

Despite the relevance of Sufi thought to Hughes' own concerns and the obvious links between Attar's poem and Hughes' *Cave Birds*, it was not specifically a Sufi framework within which Hughes chose to construct his bird-drama. Instead, Hughes turned to an art which has many things in common with Sufism but which has, in addition, a history which made it particularly suitable for Hughes' purposes at that time. That art was Alchemy.

Just as Sufi philosophy emphasises the essential indivisibility of body and spirit, so Alchemy in its original and ancient form maintains the truth of the same belief. The first of the precepts of Alchemy engraved on the Emerald Tablet of Hermes Trismegistus (who is acknowledged as the founder of the art in Ancient Egypt) states:

In truth certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of one thing
33.

The earliest known record of this Hermetic *Tabula Smaragdina* appears in an eighth century Arabic text which is ascribed to a famous alchemist, Jabbir-ibn-Hayyan³⁴. The principle that 'All things proceed from one and all are one' is constantly reiterated in alchemical writings, and Alchemy, like Sufism, contains a body of mystical teaching based on this precept.

Mercury urges silence

Traditionally, both Alchemy and Sufism have been regarded as secret doctrines. This is partly because both disciplines regard direct contact between a master and a pupil as the only valid way of passing on their knowledge, and partly due to the allegorical nature of their teaching methods. Both doctrines veil their knowledge in symbolism and metaphor, regarding it as physically and spiritually dangerous if misused. Both, at times, have been the object of religious bigotry and persecution, which has reinforced the clandestine nature of their study. Alchemy, in particular, has successfully hidden its mystical intent behind a secular facade which represents it as a practical and materialistic art. Paradoxically, this has not only done much to discredit the alchemical art, but has also ensured its survival.

Hughes' handling of the spiritual energies in *Cave Birds* owes much to both Sufi and alchemical traditions. The theme is presented in the characteristic Sufi manner through poetic metaphor and symbol, a method which Robert Graves, in his 'Introduction' to *The Sufis*, by Idris Shah, likens to the techniques of the medieval master poets of Ireland. "Under the poet's tongue lies the key to the treasury", wrote the Persian Sufi, Nizami, and, as Graves points out, such encrypted presentation provides a form of protection for

the mystical secrets³⁵. At the same time, this method allows the poet to assume the role of mystical teacher, a role which fits well into Hughes' ideas of the poet as a shaman/priest.

Hughes does not hide the mystical nature of the Cave Bird poems but presents his story, like that of *The Conference of the Birds*, so that it may be understood on several levels. In programme notes for a reading of the Cave Birds poems at the Ilkley Literature Festival in May 1975, where the poems were read whilst Baskin's drawings were projected onto an overhead screen, Hughes presented a brief outline of the story and no special understanding of Hughes' philosophies would have been required to appreciate the poetic sequence.

Hughes' notes explain that on the surface *Cave Birds* is the fable of a bird-being who "is to be imagined leading his earthly life, until one day he wakes to the fact that Higher Powers have become interested in him". These Higher Powers, appearing in the form of bird spirits, accuse and judge the protagonist for Earthly crimes, and "The sequence begins in this world, passes into an underworld, returns to this world"³⁶. From his initial appearance as a cockerel, the protagonist undergoes progressive transformations until he enters the heaven of the eagles and is reborn as a falcon.

As an accompaniment to the original typescript of the *Cave Birds* sequence, Hughes developed this story as a poem-by-poem commentary which would have been sufficient for a general understanding of his bird-drama. At a deeper, more important, level, he described it as 'The Death of Socrates and his Resurrection in Egypt'³⁷(ED) and, as such, it was

a critique of sorts of the Socratic abstraction and its consequences through Christianity to us. His resurrection in Egypt, in that case, would imply his correction, his re-absorption into the magical-religious archaic source of intellectual life in the East Mediterranean, and his re-emergence as a Horus – beloved child and spouse of the Goddess³⁸.

Hughes expanded on this aspect of the story in a letter which he wrote to me in November 1984:

The plot consists of two parallel 'stories'. In the one, the *dramatis personae* are birds. In the other, a man and a woman. My starting point was the death of Socrates. The crime for which he is judged, and which he expiates, in the sequence, is not the crime of which the Athenians accused him – rather the one for which (from one point of view) history holds him responsible, namely, the murder of the Mediterranean Goddess (as Mother and Bride).

His soul becomes a bird and is judged by birds. Throughout the stages of this judgement, projections are made, into the 'human world', where the man and woman enact (in static tableaux sure enough) the phase of the relationship, between male and female, which is being dealt with, at that point, in the judgement of the birds.

This judgement follows a simple course: accusation, defence, conviction for the murder, execution after an expiatory sacrifice (the cockerel), passage to the underworld. In the underworld, a different order of judgement takes place – as in the Bardo Thodol (The Tibetan Book Of The Dead), the soul is confronted by everything which, in the upper world, he had rejected. He is confronted, that is, by the Goddess in various forms: if he rejects again, he would be annihilated. If he accepts, he will be resurrected. So through this phase he does accept, with difficulty. Going through the ordeals of acceptance, he is transformed. When he achieves total acceptance he is resurrected. He was accused, and executed as one of the corvidae. He is judged in the underworld by the raptors, and becoming one of them is resurrected as a Falcon. Dying in Athens as a sceptical philosopher, the patron saint of irony and dialectical reason, he is resurrected in Egypt as Horus, child and spouse of the Goddess. The human scenario of the first half presents the disintegration of the female and the anaesthetised alienation of the male, and the second half the reconstitution of the female and the reunion of the female and male. So that is my view of it. The ‘alchemy’ of the process operates in bringing the most debased raw materials of de-spiritualised entropy, in the matter of human relationship, to a perfect spiritualised wholeness.

That was my intent, at least, my guiding image³⁹.

Hughes’ distaste for Socrates appeared very early in his work. ‘The Perfect Forms’ in *Lupercal* depicts Socrates as

Smiling, complacent as a phallus,
Or Buddha, whose one thought fills immensity:

Visage of Priapus: the undying tail-swinging
Stupidity of the donkey
That carries Christ (THCP 82)

Here, is a searing description of the perverted, blind stupidity of a great teacher who could have helped Man towards understanding, since, like the donkey, he ‘carries Christ’. Instead, his obsession with the superiority of Man as a rational being led him to teach the suppression of the instinctive, subjective side of human nature in favour of his objective, rational and ‘scientific’ abilities. Hughes’ use of the Biblical quotation in the final line of the poem effectively demonstrates the distortion which the Socratic view creates: to Socrates (and those who later adopted his teachings) the childlike innocence fostered by Nature throughout the process of evolution is seen as “Godforsaken darkness”, and Man as a “six-day abortion of the Absolute”, a “monstrous-headed difficult child!”.

These attitudes presaged the development of the restrictive, moralising religions which Hughes believed “divide nature, and especially love, the creative force of nature, into abstract good and physical evil”⁴⁰. And in the poem they powerfully convey the dreadful irony of Socrates’ careful ‘nursing’ of Mankind.

Ultimately, Hughes believed that “Socrates’ teachings about the Absolute led to the Platonic system of ideas — a system which has in one way or another dominated the mental life of the Western world ever since” (ME-2.77). And this mental life, as Hughes describes it, is one in which “our imagination has been immobilised” by the “scientific attitude, which is the crystallisation of the rational attitude” (ME-1.56).

With such views in mind, and with Hughes’ acknowledged belief in the magical powers of poetry, it can be seen how, by identifying Socrates with the protagonist in *Cave Birds*, Hughes intended to carry out the ritual cleansing through which the suppressed energies of the pre-Socratic world might be reborn.

The similarity, here, with Blake’s ideas on the artificial division which Man has made between rational and natural energies, and with Blake’s belief in the cyclical pattern of the conflict, death and re-birth of these energies, is very apparent. In Blake’s work the “Two Contraries” in the “Sons of Albion” are named Good and Evil, from which is made “Reasoning Power / An Abstract objecting power that Negatives everything”⁴¹. His divided Man is symbolised by two god-like figures, Orc and Urizen, which are the “two contrary states of the soul”⁴². Orc represents the bound “human imagination”⁴³ and Urizen represents “mental uniformity”⁴⁴ based on reason and moral law. Unlike Hughes, however, who used Egypt as a symbol of pre-Socratic, pre-Christian, magical and mythical fecundity, Blake, working within his own idiosyncratic interpretation of Christian thought, adopted Christian symbolism and used Egypt to represent a place (or state) of enslavement. By analogy with the Biblical story of the Exodus from Egypt which freed the Israelites from spiritual bondage, Blake interpreted Egypt as the Urizenic state of man from which Ore is released⁴⁵.

Hughes’ Egypt is the place in which Alchemy began. The powerful and magical gods of its cosmology provided the earliest stories and poetry of the Mediterranean area, some of which survived in ancient writings and were eventually incorporated in the Old Testament⁴⁶. Blake’s Egypt, on the other hand, is derived from the Christian interpretation of these Old Testament stories. This disparity between Hughes’ and Blake’s symbolic use of Egypt reflects their very different attitudes to Christian belief and Biblical interpretation, yet the purpose of their usage is identical: both are attempting to achieve an imaginative re-integration of Man’s divided nature.

A similar disparity can be found between the symbols and metaphors of early alchemical texts of Islamic, Ancient Greek and early Christian origin. In such texts, common alchemical procedures are described in terms which reflect the religious and philosophical beliefs of their authors, yet, underlying all, there is the essential Hermetic belief in the “oneness of existence”⁴⁷. Faith in the presence of the spiritual within each physical thing validates all the Alchemists’ work towards the enlightenment of Man. So, too, did Blake proclaim that “every thing that lives is Holy” (MHH. “Chorus”).

Socrates, in Blake’s writings, too, was linked with the sort of “;abstract Law”⁴⁸ which distorts human life, although Blake seems to have had some ambivalence towards him

due to the fact that his teaching are only known through Plato's works. About the pernicious influence of Greek writing in general, however, he had no doubts:

The Stolen and Perverted Writings of Homer & Ovid, Plato & Cicero, which all Men ought to condemn, are set up by artifice against the Sublime of the Bible;.... We do not want either Greek or Roman Models if we are but just & true to our own Imaginations, those Worlds of Eternity in which we shall live forever in Jesus our Lord⁴⁹. (Milton. 'Preface').

According to Blake, it was not Jesus but "The Heathen Deities", Plato and Cicero, who wrote the "Moral Virtues great and small" on which the Christian teaching of his own time was based⁵⁰. And, having dismissed the Gods of Greece and Egypt as "Mathematical Diagrams", he inscribed on his 'Laocoon Plate' the ironic comment: "If Morality was Christianity, Socrates was the Saviour".

That the protagonist in Cave Birds is (as Hughes said) also Socrates, is apparent in the poems only in the emphasis on his divided state and in his reliance on rationality and moral conventions. However, directly related to a trial and rebirth in Egypt are the elements of Egyptian mythology, especially The Egyptian Book of the Dead (the Bardo Thodol), which appear in Cave Birds and which Hirschberg has described⁵¹.

Hughes, himself, pointed out the influence of the Bardo Thodol in his depiction of the underworld where "the soul is confronted by everything which, in the upper world, he had rejected ... that is, by the Goddess in various forms"⁵². There is an obvious relationship between some of the bird-beings in Cave Birds and certain wrathful, blood-eating deities of the bardo such as the vulture-headed Grdhramukha, the hawk-headed Kankamukha the raven-headed Kakamukha, and the owl-headed Ulumukha. Apart from this, the importance of the relationship between the two works seems to lie mainly in the concept that all the manifestations originate within the person who experiences them. Constantly re-iterated in the Bardo Thodol is the advice that the visions "will emerge from your own brain and appear before you. Do not be afraid of them. Recognise whatever appears as the play of your own mind, your own projections"⁵³.

The key to progression through the bardo state, which is a state said to be experienced by all souls between death and re-birth, is the recognition and acceptance of these beings as a part of the self. Similarly, in Cave Birds, the bird-beings teach the protagonist that he must recognise and accept his own true nature before he can achieve enlightenment and wholeness.

Blake, too, declared that "All deities reside in the human breast". His Urizenic man, however, is "Self-clos'd"(U.1:3), and his "Book of eternal Brass" in which peace, love, unity, pity compassion and forgiveness are governed by "one Law"(U.I:43-8), leave Los, the fallen human, "in chains of the mind lock'd up"(U.IV:25), able to see only "small portions of the eternal world" (Eu."Prophecy": 4) "thro' narrow chinks of his cavern"⁵⁵. Hughes, by calling the Cave Birds sequence An Alchemical Cave Drama, suggests the

similarly 'cavern'd' state of his protagonist. Both views are reminiscent of the Platonic allegory of human life as being lived in a cave where reality appears only as distorted shadows reflected upon the wall.

Hughes' subtitle for *Cave Birds* has other meanings, too, for in many cultures, including those of Egypt and Ancient Greece, the cave is an important symbol, frequently used to represent an entrance to the underworld. The relevance of this to Hughes' cave drama and to the metempsychosis of his protagonist can be seen in the words of Greek scholar, Peter Gorman, who describes the cave as representing

a potent mystical vehicle through which enigmatic truths could be conveyed.... [in Greek philosophy it was] the elements of air, fire and water which acted upon the 'pentekosmos' or 'pentemychos', the five primeval caverns which completed the creation [of the world].... For the ancient Greeks the cave was sacred to many gods.... Mystical rites were conducted in them, and they were regarded as the focal points of cosmic energies and for the reception of metempsychosing psyches returning and leaving the earth⁵⁶.

From the first mention of the sun on the nursery wall in the opening lines of the *Cave Birds*, the light and shadows of the Platonic cave, the suggestions of mystical rites, and the illusion/dream/nightmare imagery occur constantly throughout the sequence. There is Manichean symbolism, too, as the flickering light of reality grows progressively stronger until the illumination of 'cavern'd man' is finally achieved by passage through the cleansing fire of the gods.

Despite these links with Platonic and Manichean philosophy, however, the fire and light imagery in *Cave Birds* derives essentially from the alchemical nature of Hughes' drama which, after the bird-drama fable and the exorcism of Socratic rationalism, comprises the third and deepest level of meaning in the poems. It is Alchemy which provides the underlying fabric into which the numerous philosophical and mythological strands are woven to create the rich and complex tapestry of Hughes' allegorical picture.

As has already been suggested, Alchemy, itself, can be understood on several levels. There is a concrete surface level derived from its association in ancient Egypt with the crafts of dyeing, metallurgy, brewing and perfume making. Over the centuries the technical skills involved in these arts were refined and condensed, forming the basis of a body of knowledge from which grew the science of Chemistry. Along the way, the magical, spiritual and imaginative aspects, which were once an essential part of these ancient crafts, came to be regarded as subjective, irrational and 'unscientific' and, consequently, unimportant. Allied to this view of Alchemy as a body of technological knowledge, is its reputation for embodying a secret method of turning base material into gold. Those who have pursued this secret have found the alchemical texts incomplete, contradictory and confusing, being couched, as they are, in language full of metaphor and symbolism; but avarice and dreams of power have spurred them on, and magic and superstition have accompanied them. It is this level of Alchemy which has fostered allegations of witchcraft and occult power and which has brought the art into disrepute.

At yet another level, Alchemy is an esoteric mystical doctrine in which the practical techniques of the alchemical art are an allegory for spiritual transubstantiation – a mnemonic for the stages by which spiritual truth might be approached. At this level the alchemical process, the magnum opus (often described allegorically as a journey) is a process by which the divine spirit (the soul) is gradually freed from the chaos of the human body (the ‘Raw Stuff’) and is purified and finally reunited with it so that a state of enlightenment and wholeness may be achieved.

The Alchemy in *Cave Birds* works at all these levels. Yet, despite Hughes’ interest in magic, there might seem to be little point in him adopting such a confusing, complex and easily misunderstood framework for his poems. He could, instead, have built his sequence around the shamanic journey, especially since his views on its relationship to mythology and the mystical quest have been so clearly stated. Alchemy, however, was more than just a suitable framework for Hughes’ bird-drama: it was also a magical process and a symbol. The perversion of Alchemy, from a mystical discipline to a scientific dead-end with questionable occult associations, provided Hughes with a perfect paradigm for the perversion of Man’s nature as a result of Socratic thought. Thus, it is entirely suitable that through the imaginative Alchemy of *Cave Birds* this situation should be reversed; that Alchemy as a spiritual art should be redeemed, and Man in his post-Socratic divided state should be restored to wholeness.

Unlike the Shaman, the Alchemist does not merely journey to and from the Otherworld for healing energies, he is himself changed and transmuted by the alchemical process. His work, as Jung explains, has “a magically effective action which, like the [alchemical] substance itself, impart[s] magical qualities”⁵⁷ (MC.532).

Because of such magical effects, Alchemy is not simply an allegory or metaphor for the spiritual journey, it is, for those who participate in the process, the journey itself. In *Cave Birds*, therefore, Hughes not only adopted the symbolic and mystical traditions of Alchemy, he took on the role of Alchemist and subjected both himself and his readers to the purifying processes of transmutation.

In addition to the different ways in which Hughes used the alchemical process, one needs to be aware of the alchemical power which he ascribes to the human mind in relation to myths and language. Words, as Hughes once wrote, “are meaningless hieroglyphs, unless the stories behind the words are known” (ME-2.81). However,

If [a] story is learned well, so that all its parts can be seen at a glance, as if we looked through a window into it, then that story has become like the complicated hinterland of a single word. It has become a word. Any fragment of the story serves as the ‘word’ by which the whole story’s electrical circuit is switched into consciousness, and all its light and power brought to bear. As a rather extreme example, take the story of Christ. No matter what point of that story we touch, the whole story hits us. If we mention the Nativity, or the miracle of the loaves and fishes, or Lazarus, or the Crucifixion, the voltage and inner brightness of the whole story is instantly there. A single word of

reference is enough – just as you need to touch a power–line with only the tip of your finger (ME–2.80).

Throughout *Cave Birds*, Hughes used this magical power of words to re–activate in his audience’s imagination some of the great mythological and mystical stories of the world. Thus, just as the Alchemist uses skill and energy (fire) to extract the spiritual, ‘alchemical’ gold from the primal chaos of his original mixture, so Hughes used his poetic powers to activate the reader’s imaginative energy and to ‘crystallise’ understanding from the ‘chaos’ of the human mind.

Thus, the ‘alchemical cave drama’ of *Cave Birds* was designed by Hughes to enlighten and transform his protagonist, his readers and himself. Yet, despite Hughes’ adoption of an alchemical framework within which to tell his story, the *Cave Birds* protagonist comes from a tradition which is closer to us than that of alchemy, or that of the heroes of Greek epic poetry, or of the shamans or medicine men whose transforming journeys share a common purpose and pattern.

As Hughes himself has suggested, the *Cave Birds* protagonist comes, recognisably, from the tradition of the medieval English morality plays. These were, like *Cave Birds*, vernacular verse dramas that dealt in an allegorical way with inner conflicts common to human experience: they dealt, too, with the difficulties of attaining spiritual enlightenment and salvation. Morality plays were performed by and for the ordinary townspeople, and they were the earliest form of secular English theatre, being entertaining, humorous, often vulgar and farcical, and extremely popular.

The characters in morality plays personify familiar abstract concepts such as Pride, Wisdom, Fellowship, Virtue and Death. And the path to spiritual salvation is commonly represented in them as a hazardous journey on which the hero (and through him the audience) learns to test his beliefs and values, and to let go of temporal concerns as a prelude to spiritual rebirth. The dramatic conventions, the characters, and the content and purpose of these plays influenced English theatre well into the Shakespearean period and beyond. They are reflected, for example, in aspects of Shakespeare’s *Richard II*, *Henry IV* (part 1), and *King Lear*: their influence is also to be found in English poetry, especially in the work of the Metaphysical poets, such as Donne, Herbert and Marvell, and in that of Milton and of Blake.

The morality play to which *Cave Birds* bears a most striking resemblance is the fifteenth century English drama, *The Summoning of Everyman*. Hughes’ protagonist, like *Everyman*, is summoned to his reckoning by higher powers. He, too, prevaricates and argues with his summoner, displaying foolishness, evasion and self–aggrandisement as he does so. Like *Everyman*, he quickly learns that Friends, Kindred and Worldly Goods cannot be relied on. And like *Everyman*, who is shown the female, Good Deeds, sickened almost to death by his way of life, the *Cave Birds* protagonist learns the effects of his own actions on a female aspect of himself that is essential to his salvation. Both protagonists are guided on their journey by innate, intuitive Knowledge, and both lose Strength, Beauty, Discretion and their Five Wits at the grave. Eventually, through

penance, contrition. humility and love, the female aspects of the protagonists' personalities (Good Deeds and her sister, Knowledge) are strengthened and restored, and the dramas end with glorious spiritual rebirth.

In broad outline, the similarities between Everyman and Cave Birds are very clear. However, in imaginative power, in visual imagery, and in its idiosyncratic view of human failings, Hughes' alchemical cave drama bears a much closer resemblance to Blake's interpretation of the Everyman story in his Illustrations of the Book Of Job⁵⁸. This resemblance will be shown in greater detail as the poems of Cave Birds are examined further. Suffice it to say, here, that whilst both Blake's version of the story of Job and Cave Birds are allegories which follow the common pattern of a spiritual pilgrimage, they differ from other such allegories in that they express, and attempt practically to apply, each poet's strongly held personal views on the nature and purpose of human life, creative art and, in particular, imagination.

In his own adaptation of the biblical story, Blake shows Job relinquishing the Book of Law, by which he had lived his life, and being enlightened and transformed through his imagination. And Blake constantly used his art and his poetry as a vehicle for his own imagination and as a means of transmitting his prophetic visions to others, thereby attempting to change his contemporary world.

Similarly, Cave Birds is designed by Hughes to enlighten and transform his protagonist, his readers and himself. Through the alchemy of imagination, Hughes seeks the healing mana – the transmuting 'Philosopher's Stone' of the Alchemists – which will end the divisions between our inner and outer worlds and re-unite us with the Universal Energies which are the Source of all.

* * * * *

Cave Birds is such a complex and carefully structured version of the epic journey that the sequence has frequently been misunderstood: its alchemical aspects have also been regarded as relatively trivial⁵⁹. A close examination of the detailed and knowledgeable way in which Hughes has used alchemy in the structure and fabric of these poems is, therefore, warranted.

Alchemy, always, is a painstaking and delicate process each step of which depends on what has gone before. And a successful alchemical synthesis, despite the cyclical repetitions which occur in many of its stages, progresses steadily and systematically towards its climax. So, because Cave Birds is essentially an alchemical synthesis, and each poem represents a part of that synthesis, an examination of the poems' alchemy needs to proceed in sequential order.

Any attempt to analyse Hughes' poems, however, especially one which relies on such an ordered approach to such a careful interweaving of secular, mythological and spiritual themes, carries with it a very real danger that the imaginative energies of the work will be destroyed, and all Hughes' alchemical efforts will be negated. With this in

mind, my discussion of the poems in Cave Birds will take a somewhat unusual form.

To begin with, by reference to old alchemical texts, their ideas and their common symbols, a brief overview of the whole alchemical process will be given. A similar description will then preface each of the four main stages of the alchemical process as they are reflected in the sequence, making broad reference to the poems which appear to constitute each stage.

Then, each poem will be introduced by Hughes' own story-telling commentary for that poem, and alternative titles for the poem or for the accompanying Baskin drawing will be given, since these often serve as a gloss on the poem's text. The reader may choose to read these headings separately, or to ignore them altogether and concentrate on the discussion of the alchemical/spiritual aspects of the poems which will immediately follow them.

Throughout the discussion, the similarities and echoes which exist between Hughes' treatment of the spiritual journey and that of various other well known mythologies, religious texts and stories will be suggested. In particular, the close correspondences which exist between the ideas, text and illustrations of Cave Birds and Blake's graphic interpretation of the story of Job will be examined.

By all these means, it is hoped that the background knowledge which the reader brings to the Cave Birds poems will be expanded so as to illuminate the text and foster, rather than destroy, the imaginative, alchemical changes which Hughes sought to bring about. It is hoped, also, that Hughes' increasing ability to integrate form, content and purpose in his work will become clear.

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Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama

Seeing he that readeth without understanding doth see many things but hath no relish to them he is rightly compared to the shadow on the wall, and is more miserable than one that is wholly blind, who not seeing doth understand1.

Fundamental to the alchemical process is a belief in the essential unity of all things and in the transmutability of matter. As in Ancient Greek philosophy, matter is thought to be composed of the four elements, Air, Fire, Earth and Water, which are related to each

other by four qualities – Hot, Cold, Moist and Dry. Each element possesses two qualities and is linked to two other elements by the quality held in common. So, as can be seen from the diagram, Water possesses cold and moist qualities and is linked to Earth by its cold quality, whilst Earth is linked to Fire by their common quality of dryness, and so on

... all four elements renounce their own nature and, by rotation, transform themselves into one another.... Just as in the beginning there was One, so also in this work everything comes from One and returns to One. This is what is meant by the re-transformation of the elements... 2.

The Elements

The common axis around which the rotation of the elements takes place (see diagram) represents the perfect balance of the elements. This is The Centre. The Source, from which all things have come and to which they must return. This is the force which maintains the essential unity of the cosmos; the power at “the still point of the turning world”³. It is, also, the quintessence, or the spiritual centre, towards which the alchemical process leads; the alchemical gold (‘Our Gold’) towards which the work is directed, and “the divine breath, the central and universal fire, which vivifies all things that exist”⁴.

On Earth, the original harmony of the elements has been disturbed and matter is in an impure, chaotic state. It retains, however, some germ of quintessential, spiritual energy through which, by the alchemical interaction of elements and qualities, unity and balance may be restored. This flux of matter and the unbalanced chaotic state of our own world is something which is readily apparent in Hughes’ work. He depicts it in the cyclical processes of growth and decay in the world of Elmet, where earth, now, is “the only future” (THCP. 456-6), equivalent to the ‘Raw Stuff’ from which the alchemical process begins. And, in *Cave Birds*, he wrestles with the microcosm of chaotic elements in human nature, presenting his Everyman protagonist, in ‘The accused’, as “as “lord of middens” (THCP.425): the self-aggrandised, self-deluded master of base matter.

The quintessential energy is there in Hughes’ work, too, and the continual flux of the universal energies, which underlies his portrayal of Nature, holds the promise of regeneration and of a new, if temporary, balance being achieved. Alchemists identify this quintessential energy with mercury (both the naturally occurring element, mercury, and Mercury/Hermes the divine messenger), and they attempt to aid elemental interaction by means of a series of hierarchical procedures using mercury as a catalyst. But sulphur, too, plays an important part in the alchemical process, its heavier, coagulating nature providing the balance to the mobile, volatile qualities of mercury. The coalescent and cleansing powers of both elements are necessary for the progressive purification of the base matter with which the alchemist begins this lengthy task. And, like the Chinese concept of Yin and Yang, each element contains, always, a germ of the other from which change and readjustment can begin.

Mercury is, by its nature, the most active and volatile of the two elements. It is regarded

as the Feminine force but, like the Goddess, it has a double nature, being 'the water of life', airy, cooling and nurturing but, also, "the devouring dragon", fiery and destructive. It is the vital Spirit, 'the divine breath', and it contains the alchemical gold – "the germ of the sun"⁵ – in volatile form. Mercury is the dissolving and animating element.

"Sulphur is the Soul"⁶, the Masculine force. It is hot, dry and coagulating, and it contains the alchemical gold in a fixed, unproductive, form. Sulphur, in its common chemical form is impure and separable – "the cause of the imperfection of metals" – but the "Inner Sulphur" is the pure, inseparable Soul⁷. Sulphur is the coagulating and fixing element.

In Nature, the chemical elements mercury and sulphur are found in perfect union in 'Cinnabar'. Alchemists call this red mercury/sulphur compound, 'the red stone', and from it they obtain metallic 'quicksilver' which is essential for turning Base Matter into Gold.

Because Mercury is the most active of the two generative elements, it is mentioned more frequently than Sulphur in alchemical texts. In humankind, its generative force is present "in blood and semen, ... in the heart and in the breath."⁸ so, it is represented in the texts as bodily organs and essences, but also, symbolically, as the 'wind of Hermes', a white bird, 'dew of heaven' and 'celestial milk'. In its destructive form, it appears as poison, 'the serpent', and 'the devouring dragon'⁹.

Uroborus

Often, the dual generative and devouring nature of Mercury is represented by the tail-eating dragon, Uroborus, which Jung called the "world creating spirit concealed or imprisoned in matter"¹⁰. This common alchemical symbol represents the capacity of matter to devour itself, release its own spirit, and be regenerated by that spirit when it returns to the body. It is a symbol of timeless continuity, of destruction and re-creation in perfect balance; it is "Universal Nature in her latent condition"¹¹.

Mercury/Hermes

And Nature is of particular importance in Alchemy where, in its dynamic condition, it is represented by two serpents (Mercury and Sulphur) coiled around the caduceus of the messenger, Mercury/Hermes¹². As the early Alchemist, Janus Lacinius Theraput wrote: "The rhythms and cycles of Nature contain the code and root of our handiwork"¹³.

For similar reasons, Nature is of particular importance in Hughes' work, being the source of cyclical change and renewal. It is not surprising, therefore, that the dragon which links Mercury and Nature, should be regarded by Hughes, also, as a symbol for the Universal Energies. Discussing these with Faas in 1971, Hughes talked of the way in which they emerged as the "dragon of Revelations" in his poem, 'Gog':

"Gog"... started as a description of the German assault through the Ardennes and it turned into the dragon of Revelations. It alarmed me so much I wrote a poem about the Red Cross Knight just to set against it with the idea of keeping it under control ... keeping its effects under control¹⁴.

The dragon in the Book of Revelation is “the great dragon ... that old serpent, called the Devil and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth” after a war in heaven¹⁵. Its parallel in early Greek cosmologies is the “Subtle Spirit, Nature, which drew the Divine Light down into the dark Abyss”¹⁶, and it is clearly related to the alchemical Mercurial dragon of the Aurelia Occulta, which is “The old Dragon found everywhere on the globe of the earth”¹⁷.

Speaking of the dragon of Revelations, Hughes called it “an eruption, from the deeper resources, of enraged energy - energy that for some reason or other has become enraged”¹⁸.

Yet, despite its destructive power, Hughes felt able, through his poetry, to use this energy for creative and healing purposes.

In Cave Birds, as in ‘Gog’, the enraged energies erupt into the world. Under Hughes’ poetic control, however, they will destroy and then re–create the chaotic, impure matter of the protagonist from whom they come, just as the Mercurial dragon destroys and re–creates the physical and spiritual substance of Base Matter in the alchemical process.

Physically and metaphorically, an alchemical synthesis entails the progressive purification of a substance in conditions of carefully regulated heat. The process begins with base, chaotic matter which, through repeated distillation and condensation (‘Solve et Coagula’ is the phrase used in alchemical texts) is gradually cleansed of its impurities until the pure essence (the alchemical gold) is revealed. Always, Sulphur and Mercury are necessary in the procedures, one or other predominating at any particular time although they may not always be clearly distinguished. And “just as in the beginning there was One, so also everything comes from One and returns to One”¹⁹, and the patterns of the synthesis, like the patterns of Nature, are circular. Each procedure may be repeated many times, and the pure essence which is eventually obtained is re–immersed in base matter to act as a catalyst for further transmutation. So, the released spirit in the final poem of Cave Birds must return to Earth where Mankind continually seeks to capture and control it. And so, too, the process of change and the potential for renewal is constant and infinite.

Although the process and the procedures of the alchemical work are cyclical, and although the number of stages and operations in the synthesis varies between texts, it is generally agreed that there are four stages and seven operations through which the original material must pass. The four stages begin with Base Matter (‘Raw Stuff’), progress through stages dominated by Mercury, and by Sulphur, and culminate in the synthesis of alchemical gold (or Lapis, the Philosophers’ Stone). The seven operations, which may be repeated many times, are often symbolised by the seven planets and seven metals:

Calcination Putrefaction Solution Distillation

Saturn	Jupiter	Mars	Venus
Lead	Tin	Iron	Copper

Conjunction	Sublimation	Congelation
Mercury	Moon	Sun
Quicksilver	Silver	Gold

Described in terms of four stages and seven processes, the alchemical synthesis appears to be fairly straightforward. Alchemical texts, however, are notoriously obscure. They rarely detail, or agree on, the exact methods the Alchemist should employ, and they are often deliberately ambiguous and misleading. The language of the texts, too, is one of rich poetic metaphor and symbolism rather than factual statement, and the interpretation of such texts is notoriously difficult, even for an experienced alchemist.

An alchemical synthesis, for example, may be described in terms of a perilous journey, and materials and processes are associated with astrological signs and are represented in the text by colours, animals, and sigils. So, Mercury may appear in the texts as whiteness, a white bird, an eagle, a snowy swan, a dragon, divine rain or dew, a small child, or as its astrological sign (♿), any of which symbols may indicate the metallic quicksilver, or the planet Mercury, or Mercurius (the mythological winged messenger), or the divine spirit within the human being. Understanding an alchemical text, consequently, is like solving a riddle, and its meaning may vary according to the interpretations made.

For whatever reason, whether it be for self-protection, from the need to keep spiritual knowledge from misuse, or simply because of greed, alchemists have always demanded application and special perception in their followers. As one mediaeval alchemist wrote:

One must not explain this art in obscure words only: on the other hand, one must not explain it so clearly that all can understand it. I therefore teach it in such a way that nothing will remain hidden to the wise man, even though it may strike mediocre minds as quite obscure; the foolish and the ignorant, for their part, will understand none of it at all... 20.

This particular statement, as well as the cryptic alchemical practices discussed, is certainly relevant to an understanding of *Cave Birds*, since it, too, is a text in which important and complex knowledge is embedded in a seemingly simple story.

It is important to remember, too, that authors of alchemical texts always speak of the material process and the spiritual process together, so that every action and event has both a material and a spiritual meaning. In the 'alchemical cave drama' of *Cave Birds*, therefore, it is to be expected that the imaginative fable of judgement, death and rebirth which Hughes presents may be understood on a number of different levels, one of which is spiritual.

In spiritual terms, the difficulties of the circular path which the Alchemist must travel lie

in its paradoxical nature. Over-riding all else is the paradox of the death of self which is necessary for enlightenment and re-birth. In T.S.Eliot's words:

In order to possess what you do not possess You must go by the way of
dispossession²¹.

This is the paradoxical pattern which is common to most spiritual teaching. And this is the spiritual pattern which parallels the Cave Birds fable.

Table I (below), which is based on a summary of the alchemical stages and procedures made by Ad de Vries²², suggests the way in which these may be related to the structure of Cave Birds. For a fuller understanding of this structure the individual poems of Hughes' bird drama must be examined and, to provide the essential alchemical background for this examination, a general summary of the main alchemical parallels is given at the beginning of each 'Stage'.

Table 1

Alchemical texts differ in their descriptions of stages and processes, and each operation may be repeated several times. Consequently, this chart is a guide to the general pattern of the synthesis, not a definitive analysis. Since the stages of the alchemical process merge gradually into each other, certain poems (identified in green) may be regarded as transitional.

Alchemical Stages

Cave Birds Title

Alchemical Operation 'Solve et Coagule'.

STAGE 1: RAW STUFF 'Prime Matter'.

Black. Death of the profane.

Copper turned into black oxide 'killing it'.

The elementary organisation of inherent possibilities; the unconscious; the instincts; the soul in its original condition; latent force, guilt.

The scream

The summoner

After the first fright

The interrogator

She seemed so considerate

The judge

The plaintiff

In these fading moments

1. CALCINATION: 'Death of the Profane'. Heating of the Raw Stuff.

2. PUTREFACTION: 'Separation, Mortification, Putrefaction'
'The Black Sun' Nigredo
'The Raven's Head'

STAGE 2: MERCURY: White (a silver-coloured alloy with mercury and arsenic): lunar, feminine, the first purification, imagination, feeling, the 'minor work'.

The Executioner
The accused
First the doubtful charts
The knight
Something was happening
The gatekeeper
A flayed crow

The baptist
Only a little sleep

3. SOLUTION: 'purification'.

The Leukosis
'The Peacock's Tail' Albedo
'The White Queen'

4. DISTILLATION: "rain" of purified matter = the elements of salvation '
Cibation, 'Wetting with Dew', Sublimation, 'The Red King'.

EARTH AND WATER PREDOMINATE

STAGE 3: SULPHUR: Red: Solar and masculine, deeper purification:
reason, intuition, passion.

AIR AND FIRE PREDOMINATE

STAGE 4: LAPIS: Gold: Absolute synthesis (Jung's individuation: transcendence, 'the greater work').

A green mother
As I came
A riddle
The scapegoat
After there was nothing
The guide
His legs ran about

Walking bare
Bride and groom

The owl flower

5. CONJUNCTION: 'joining of opposites'.

'The Chemical Marriage'
Crystallisation

6. SUBLIMATION: 'detachment from the world + dedication to spiritual striving = ascension of the Volatile. (= spiritual principle)'. Prometheus, angel, 'The Phoenix'

UNITY OF THE ELEMENTS

The risen

7. (PHILOSOPHIC) CONGELATION: 'binding of the fixed (= male) with the volatile (= female) = 'saved' variable principles.'
Projection. Exaltation.

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Stage One of the Alchemical Synthesis

Calcination, Mortification, Putrefaction, Nigredo

The immortal soul is the invisible celestial fire¹.

Gerhard Dorn

The alchemical synthesis begins with 'Base Matter' or 'Raw Stuff', which is a mixture of substances, a chaos in which the prima materia (the pure original matter and energy of the Source) lies concealed. This 'Base Matter' is the 'lead' (the densest and basest of metals) from which the alchemical 'gold' will be made. It comes under the astrological sign of Saturn (♄) and, for the Alchemist, its spiritual parallel is "the chaotic immersion of consciousness in the body"². Saturn, according to Burckhardt, represents the human intellect in its capacity for knowledge, as opposed to its capacity for understanding.

In *Cave Birds*, the first stage of the alchemical synthesis extends from 'The scream' to 'The executioner', and the 'Base Matter' with which the synthesis begins is the protagonist. His "Flesh of bronze, stirred with a bronze thirst" (CB.7), and his "bronze image" (CB.8), signify some small progress from the original chaotic state of the human organism, for bronze is a lead/copper mixture which symbolically combines Saturn and Venus, Intellect and Spirit. The protagonist, therefore, has knowledge but not understanding.

He sees the beauties and horrors around him but, because of his rational abilities, he feels himself to be superior to the forces of Nature which govern these things. It is this arrogance and pride which will be his downfall. Hidden within him, however, is an element of Spirit through which the long journey towards understanding may begin. This is the divine element in human nature, the prima materia through which spiritual transmutation may be achieved.

The first procedure undertaken by the Alchemist is one of gentle heating: Calcination. During this heating, the first separation of Mercury from Sulphur occurs³. Next, the elements are re-combined so that, by the destructive power of Mercury, the matter is gradually broken down and brought into solution. Metaphorically, this is 'The First Death', the first cleansing of the 'Base Matter' during which it undergoes 'Mortification and Putrefaction'. This first stage ends in a return to chaos which is symbolised by a blackness that Alchemists call the nigredo or the 'Raven's Head'.

Spiritually, the first alchemical stage is paralleled by an awakening of awareness or consciousness in the 'Base Matter' of the human being. It corresponds to the first examination of the inner world and it is often accompanied by the first stirrings of conscience. In Hughes' own life, one might regard his early apprehension of the intrinsic value of animal life as just such an initial awakening. For his *Cave Birds* protagonist, however, the situation is more complex and traumatic.

The 'Spirit' which erupts from within the protagonist to begin the work of transmutation is unrecognised and resisted by him but, through the persistent 'heat' of its accusations, his self-consciousness begins. By this means, the 'Base Matter' of the protagonist is gradually broken down, he is 'mortified' and, as he begins to lose his insensitive and arrogant facade, he enters a state of confusion and blackness. This state, which corresponds to the nigredo, is represented in the poetic sequence by 'The executioner' – a raven, like the bird in Baskin's powerful drawing which accompanies this poem.

In psychological terms, Jung likens the first stage of the alchemical work "to the encounter with the shadow" (MC.497) which represents a psychic split. The emphasis on light and shadow, dream and reality in 'The scream' and 'The summoner' may certainly suggest such an encounter, but the shadow also has mythical and folkloric associations with the Underworld and with the Soul, both of which are of great importance in Hughes' cave drama. The summoner, therefore, is equally an eruption from the suppressed sub-conscious energies of the protagonist and an appearance of Hermes/Mercury, the summoner and psychopomp who traditionally guides the Soul on the journey to the Underworld.

Mercury, the summoner, the alchemical divine spirit in 'Base Matter', appears in the early Cave Birds poems in several different emanations all of which prod, probe, pull apart and devour the material aspect of the protagonist. The solution in which this destruction takes place known to Alchemists as 'the menstruum' which devours the lifeblood containing the seed of re-birth: Mercury is the menstruum⁴, it is also "the water which teareth the Bodies, and makes them no Bodies"⁵. So, in Cave Birds it appears as the "blood-eating" summoner (CB.8), and as the vulture, "the blood-louse / of ether"(CB.12), the agent of bodily destruction.

Alchemically, such destruction is necessary, for "Unless the bodies lose their corporeal nature and become spirit, we shall make no progress in our work. The solution of the body takes place through the operation of the spirit..."⁶.

Following the first separation of Spirit from Matter, Mercury, in the first gentle heat of the alchemical process, begins the destructive tasks of mortification and putrefaction through which the Sulphurous impurities of the 'Base Matter' are released.

Heat, at each stage of the alchemical process, is carefully controlled and four degrees of fire govern the four stages of the alchemical process. At this stage "the first degree so gentle be that feeling may excel it [i.e. heat which may be handled... By this degree of fire and not by any other, our matter ought necessarily to be purified, dissolved, mortified and made black"⁷.

So, although the first encounters which the Cave Birds protagonist has with the bird-beings promote cold terror which "chills" him like "ether"(CB.12), and the mood of these first poems is rational and cool, there is warmth enough in the accusations to promote the flush and sweat of embarrassment and to begin the processes of guilt and mortification.

Following the mortification, or stripping down, comes the putrefaction which returns the body to a solution or a state of chaos. In Alchemy, this stage is known as 'the return to the mother' because it is the necessary preparation for the re-birth of the spirit in its first state of purification.

In *Cave Birds*, a change in the nature of the interrogating vulture signals the change from mortification to putrefaction in the alchemical process. From being a bird of destruction in 'The interrogator', she becomes a comforting angel in 'She seemed so considerate':

'Wings', I thought, 'Is this an angel'? (ED).

Symbolically, this second 'vulture poem' presents the protagonist's return to the mother and the necessary surrender of will which spiritual teachings regard as part of the return to the womb prior to rebirth.

Such symbolism has Natural parallels, and underlying the symbols which Alchemists use to describe the process of putrefaction are the fertility cycles of Nature, for, as the Alchemist, George Ripley, wrote:

... without the graine of wheate
Dye in the ground, encrease maist thou none get.

And in likewise without the matter putrifie,
It may in no wise truly be alterate ⁸.

Burial and Rebirth

In Alchemy, therefore, it is an established principle that without putrefaction "no seed may multiply"⁹ and that there can be "no generation without corruption"¹⁰.

Just as Hughes' vulture is a black agent of the sun, so the darkness of putrefaction is often represented in alchemical texts by a black sun (*Sol niger*). In practical Alchemy, the whole process involves a slow, progressive darkening of the substance, which is kept in a sealed vessel (the Philosophers' Egg) at a constant gentle heat. Eventually, "a black colour and a fetid smell" indicate that the "deadly poison" of the "Raven's Head"¹¹ has been obtained and the first stage of the work is complete.

Within the Philosopher's Egg, the separated Sulphur and Mercury of the body are recombined and dissolved in a liquid *nigredo*. The *Cave Birds* poems, 'The plaintiff' and 'In these fading moments...', present again two aspects of the protagonist which are, respectively, a dry, burning, Sulphurous aspect and a cool, Mercurial aspect. Each has already been purged of some imperfections. The Sulphur which remains now is the inner Sulphur, the Soul. But the Mercury is, as yet, impure, for although the mask of arrogance has been destroyed, the protagonist still attempts to exonerate himself by a cool, rational plea of "imbecile" innocence (CB.20).

At the end of 'In these fading moments...', as Nature's world darkens with the

snow–melt and the muddy, swirling rivers of a pre–generative chaos akin to putrefaction, she rejects the protagonist’s plea. He is condemned to the poison of the Raven of Ravens (“his hemlock”(CB. 22)) which engulfs him in the total blackness of the pre–birth world, and the return to the mother is completed.

* * * * *

‘The scream’

‘I was just walking along’ (ED)

The (protagonist) hero, in the decent piety of his innocence, is surprised. What has he failed to take account of ?¹²

In ‘The scream’ Hughes suggests the blind incomprehension and self-deception – the unenlightened chaos – of his protagonist in terms which reflect common human attitudes. The situation he describes is the status quo from which the journey, the transmutation, must begin.

The protagonist, who later describes himself as an “imbecile innocent” (‘In these fading moments I wanted to say’(CB.20)), is less innocent than he ‘piously’ believes¹³. He is one who lives in naive non–comprehension of his own nature: A “newborn babe” whose “Flesh of bronze” and “bronze thirst” link him with the degenerate mythological ‘race of bronze’ which, according to Ovid , was “more fierce and warlike, yet unstained by crime” than the first people made by the gods in the Golden Age¹⁴. Like us, he has fallen from his original state of innocence into the chaos of experience, and his bronze thirst inures him to violence and predisposes him to complacency and pride. He is child-like in his naivety but, as in Blake’s ‘Jerusalem’,

The Infant Joy is beautiful, but its anatomy

Horrible ghast & deadly: Nought shalt thou find in it

But dark despair & everlasting brooding melancholy: (Jer.22:22–4).

The protagonist’s world, too, is the Blakean world of experience in which Man’s divided nature and his destructive presence are ubiquitous. It is our world: a world desensitised to Nature – a world in which life is crushed by the “inane weights of iron” which are Man’s mechanical inventions. Its ills are symbolised by images of mutilated creatures: people and rabbits are crushed, “Calves heads all dew-bristled with blood” grin from counters, and the images and atmosphere suggest a threatening undercurrent of Dionysian energies which periodically erupt in bloody rituals of slaughter such as Hughes depicts in Gaudete.

Amidst all this, however, the protagonist feels no sense of his own mortality and no responsibility for the deaths of other creatures. His is a mind “desensitised to the true nature of nature”¹⁵ and, for him, the world is as it always has been. His “childhood’s / Nursery picture”, “the sun on the wall”, is still there, co–existent with “my gravestone”, with which he “happily” shares his dreams¹⁶. He feels himself to be in a position of invulnerability. His self–delusion, like a “falsifying dream” of the Hawk in ‘Hawk Roosting’(THCP.68), allows him to feel “creaturely” bravery in the face of mechanical

threats and to view destruction with equanimity from a detached, superior position on “the wheel of the galaxy”. Yet, it is this alienation from Nature, this lack of understanding of his own place in the Natural world, which is the very substance of his guilt. Like Socrates, the arch rationalist with whom Hughes identifies him, he will later defend such beliefs with rational argument. Now, however, the enduring and powerful forces of Nature (exemplified in the poem by the hawk, the mountains, the worms and the newborn baby) make their inevitable intrusion into his life and demand his submission.

The unexpected, seemingly inexplicable, and horrifying events which occur in the life of the Cave Birds protagonist resemble, in many respects, those which are described in the biblical account of the life of Job. Job, too, is pious, and the misfortunes and trials to which God subjects him are seemingly unwarranted. Yet, as Blake makes clear in the illustrations in which he interpreted Job’s story, Job, like Hughes’ protagonist, is guilty of complacency, pride and self-deception which distort his vision and deny him true knowledge of spiritual unity¹⁷.

Blake’s first picture of Job (Plate I, below) includes the biblical text which describes him as “perfect and upright”. Symbolically, however, Blake shows Job as a victim of ‘single vision’, cut off from imagination and feeling (the instruments which symbolise imagination hang unused in the tree). Similarly, in the first poem of the Cave Birds sequence, Hughes’ protagonist displays a superficial serenity which is undermined by certain other aspects of the overall description of him. As events proceed, the recognisable pattern of a journey of spiritual enlightenment becomes apparent in both stories, and the similarities of theme and treatment continue, but there are yet other details in Hughes’ handling of the Cave Birds story which make the connection between his ideas and those of Blake more certain

Job Plate 1

The foolish pride and brazen arrogance of Hughes’ protagonist are beautifully captured in the Baskin drawing for a later poem in the sequence, ‘The accused’(CB.24), which was earlier entitled, ‘Socrates’ Cock’(ED). At the same time, this picture of “A Tumbled Socratic Cock”¹⁸ connects the protagonist with mythological epic heroes such as Hercules, who is shown in the Durer etching, ‘Der Hercules’, “as wearing a cock’s comb or head of a rooster, on his head”¹⁹. Less well known, but more pertinent to this discussion, is Blake’s etching of his character, Hand, who is shown at the beginning of Chapter 4 of ‘Jerusalem’ (Jer. Pl.78) with a “ ‘ravening’ beak... and a cock’s comb”²⁰. Hand, the eldest of the twelve Sons of Albion, is the “Reasoning Spectre”. He is described by Foster Damon as the source of “the whole materialistic system of war and of society” and as the destroyer “of all innocent joys [who] opposes love with cruelty”²¹. Hughes’ familiarity with this particular etching is most likely, since it occurs in Blake’s work immediately opposite a passage on which Hughes has based at least two poems, ‘Ballad from a Fairy Tale’(THCP.171) and ‘The Angel’(THCP.492):

among my valleys of the south
And saw a flame of fire, even as a Wheel
Of fire surrounding all the heavens: it went

From west to east against the current of
Creation, and devour'd all things in its loud
Fury & thundering course round heaven & earth.
By it the Sun was roll'd into an orb:
By it the Moon faded into a globe,
Travelling thro' the night; for, from its dire
And restless fury, Man himself shrunk up
Into a little root a fathom long.

And I asked a Watcher & a Holy-One

Its Name; he answer'd: "It is the Wheel of Religion". (Jer. Pl.77. 1–13).

Not only is Blake's figure, Hand, suitably related in character to Hughes' protagonist but he occurs in Blake's work immediately after the passage, "To the Christians" (Jer. Pl.77). This outcry against the divisive form of Christianity which emphasises "Mental Studies and Performances" and despises "Art and Science", is one which is echoed in Hughes' own writings, especially in the Introduction and Note to *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, where he decries the Calvinist influence which taught us to "divide nature, and especially love, the creative force of nature, into abstract good and physical evil"²².

One further point can be made concerning the relationship between Hand and the Cave Birds protagonist. The positioning of this particular etching of Hand in Blake's poetic sequence, following, as it does, Blake's vision of some fiery and violent change, makes it apparent that Hand, like Hughes' protagonist, is about to experience such a change. Erdman, in fact, takes the cock's comb on Hand's head as "a symbol of morning" which metaphorically suggests that "the night of death 'is far spent, the day is at hand'"²³. The nature of the change, both for Hand and for Hughes' protagonist, is to be revolutionary, and Blake's vision of the clash of "this terrible devouring sword / ... opposing Nature!" (Jer. Pl.77: 15–20) is also expressed in occult and fiery terms reminiscent of the imagery used by alchemists to describe allegorical dreams and visions.

Hughes' protagonist, in his divided state, also opposes Nature. But his appetites, like those of "a newborn baby at the breast", are still controlled by Nature. When he attempts to praise the world he becomes aware of a radical split within himself. One part of him, represented as "his mate" (who has, significantly, had some part of himself removed), in his half-coma, half understanding, manages a rigid "stone temple smile" and a raised hand – a mindless ritual of praise which appears in early drafts of the poem as:

He merely let his thoughts float away
Into the starry silence
Into the book of Job
Into the burial service
Into the yawn
That suddenly yelled ...

and:

I merely prayed, automatically:

'Blessed be the name of ...' (ED).

Within him, however, there has crystallised a hard, painful, fundamental truth which, like "A silent lump of volcanic glass", tears his "gullet" and vomits itself forth in a scream. So, with a suggestion of ritual sacrifice conveyed in the image of "an obsidian dagger", Hughes begins the breaking down of self-image which must precede any spiritual transformation. And, with this first indication of the horror which exists beneath the pious facade of the protagonist, the stage is set for 'The summoner' to appear.

'The summoner'

'A Hercules-in-the-Underworld Bird'²⁴

The hero's (protagonist's)²⁵ cockerel innocence, it turns out, somehow becomes his guilt – His own nature, finally, (the inescapable creature of his flesh and blood) brings him to court.

The summoner is essentially a part of the protagonist. He is the spectre from the subconscious mind, the daemon, the possessor of deep instinctive truths who has the potential to both destroy and save the protagonist.

He is analogous to 'Lucifer', the light bearer, who appears in Plate 5 of Blake's Illustration of the Book of Job under his other name, 'Satan', 'The Angel of the Divine Presence'. Satan/Lucifer, who is Job's summoner, is often, like Mercury, identified with the dragon of Chaos.

Job Plate 5

Satan/Lucifer is the first of Blake's 'Seven Eyes of God', seven states which Blake formulated to describe "the path of Experience which Job must tread" on his spiritual journey. In Blake's title page for his Illustrations of the Book of Job, these seven states are depicted as angels symbolically grouped to show the descent from the material state and re-ascent into the spiritual state. According to Foster Damon, Blake believed that

These seven States were divinely instituted so that man should mechanically be brought back to communion with God. In the epics, Blake's technical names for the Seven are Lucifer, Molech, Elohim, Shaddai, Pahad, Jehovah and Jesus. They represent Pride of Selfhood; the executioner; the judge; the Accuser; Horror at the results; Perception of Evil; and finally the Revelation of the Good. This is Man's customary course through Experience ²⁶.

It is readily apparent that the titles of some of the Cave Birds poems are identical with certain of Blake's seven States, and the connection between the 'cockerel innocence' of Hughes' protagonist and 'Lucifer' as 'Pride of Selfhood' is easily made through their shared blind arrogance. This connection is reinforced by Foster Damon's explanation that Blake

found Job's tragic flaw in [his] innocence. Supported by his material prosperity, he has

never grown up spiritually, has never trod the path of Experience... Satan the Accuser dwells in his own brain. And this Satan is to usurp for a time the place of the true God 27.

As with Job's Satan, the summoner of Hughes' protagonist dwells within him. At night, when the conscious mind is at rest, this other self is a "Shadow stark on the wall", "Spectral, gigantified", accusatory. Just occasionally, like a glow of light, "an effulgence" in a leafy oakwood²⁸, it can be "glimpsed" in a more benign form. It is "your soul", "your protector", hidden deep beneath the mask of arrogance which is the "grotesque" brazen facade of the day-time self.

The only 'evidence' of the other's existence is "A sigh" (traditionally believed to be an exhalation of the Soul), or some half-remembered promptings which remain in the mind like left-over "rinds and empties". But, "sooner or later", this primitive, "blood-eating" self, which grows parasitically within, must be recognised and acknowledged as a part of the whole identity. The importance of this lesson and its relevance for all Mankind are indicated in Hughes' shift from first person narrative in 'The scream' to the use of an inclusive 'you' in 'The summoner'.

Although the summoner is your protector and your Soul, and although the soft, pleasing sounds and imagery of line 7 of the poem ("Among crinkling of oak-leaves – an effulgence") suggest his healing association with light, this figure from the subconscious is terrifying. He is an apocalyptic symbol of death, and in four cold, clipped lines Hughes captures the Mercurial paradox of protection and destruction which he embodies, describing him as:

The carapace
Of foreclosure

The cuticle
Of final arrest

Baskin's illustration shows a wingless bird with human genitals. It suitably portrays the dual nature of the Summoner, combining suggestions of the soft feathered body of a later illustration for 'A green mother'(CB.41) with a crow's head and the vicious looking leg spurs and claws of a raptor. Here, truly, we see "the grip" which cannot be avoided.

'The advocate'

'A Desert Bittern' / 'A Deep-wading Desert Bittern'(ED)

'A Deep Wading Desert Bittern'²⁹

He is given some indication (The council for the opposition gives him some indication (ED)) of the nature of the charge. What is he guilty of exactly? Being alive? Or of some error in the use of his life.

In the Exeter drafts there are three quite different poems under this title. The one included in the A sequence was the version read at the Ilkley Festival and in the BBC broadcast of Cave Birds. Keith Sagar collected the broadcast version in The Achievement of Ted Hughes(p.346). None of the versions were included in the

published sequences.

All three poems indicate that the protagonist's guilt does not lie simply in "being alive" but in the insensitive materialism in which he has indulged at the expense of the suppressed inner self³⁰.

The Advocate comes to redress the balance, listing the protagonist's sins and "Totting the count" (all versions):

Voice C: You corrupted the pure light
To put it to work.

...

Voice B: Not only did you borrow ... you stole.

C: You plundered ... with stretched mouth glistening.

A: You amassed, you wallowed in engrossment

B: With a bonfire unconcern for the screaming
In the cells (Version A).

All this continued until the inner self was a

... speechless upside-down corpse

Hanging at your back

Who has paid in kind (Version C).

The upside-down corpse is a common symbol in occult and mythological ritual. Odin, the Nordic sun-god, and the Greek Dionysus, were annually sacrificed in this position prior to their descent to the Underworld and their subsequent re-birth³¹. Like 'The Hanged Man' in the Tarot pack, the symbolism is of the overturning of the material world by the natural, emotional world; it is the symbolism of imminent revolution and change. In the poem, the Advocate (who has been the suspended inner energies of the protagonist) comes to begin the awakening and the revelation of the painful truth. He is, in one version, "like the piper/opening the mountain of oblivion". In others, he describes himself as

... the hypodermic. My first word

Will start the truth shining from your pores (Versions A, C).

Here I sit on your brow, like a mosquito

Totting the count (All versions).

So, like the "blood-louse" vulture, the mosquito-like Advocate will extract a blood-sacrifice from the protagonist in expiation of his guilt.

And, just as in the Alchemist's fire "the body becomes moist and gives forth a kind of bloody sweat" (MC.40), so the first pricking of conscience produces the sweat of guilt and the disintegration of the bronze image begins.

'After the first fright'

He is confronted in court with his victim. It is his own daemon, whom he sees now for the first time. (The protagonist realises he is out of his depth) He protests, as an honourable Platonist, thereby re-enacting his crime in front of the judges. He still cannot understand his guilt. He cannot understand the (decisive) sequence of cause and effect.

In order to undertake the journey to the Underworld, the human body must be transformed. The shamans of primitive groups achieve this by adopting the form of an animal: ordinary humans usually achieve it through death. In this poem, Hughes uses images of ritual death and transformation which are common in both mythological lore and spiritual doctrine. His protagonist, however, is being torn apart by an inner conflict.

As the revolution of the elements of personality continues, the suppressed natural energies are no longer under the control of the protagonist's rational powers. He may argue his "way out of every thought anybody could think", but he is unable to control his body and his emotions, or "the stopping and starting / Catherine wheel" in his belly "which seemed to have been nailed there to enlighten him"(ED).

The symbols of revolution are central to this poem. The fiery wheel of the sun and of Nature, like the wheel of torture on which St. Catherine was martyred, is turning and burning, and no rational ability in any creature can stop it.

Seeking to evade his guilt, the protagonist exacerbates the situation by denying his feelings and offering, as an 'honourable Platonist', rational, abstract arguments of explanation. Inevitably, each of his explanations for the status quo becomes a further mutilation of his daemon and hence of himself. In an exact representation of the Advocate's accusation that the rational self has fed on the hidden daemon, 'Civilisation' and 'Sanity' (those excuses which are fundamental to our own rationale for our way of life) are vividly and graphically shown as causing the protagonist's mutilation and death:

When I said: 'Civilisation',
He began to chop off his fingers and mourn.
When I said: 'Sanity and again Sanity and above all Sanity,'
He dismembered himself with a cross-shaped cut.
In earlier drafts of the poem, the protagonist, like Blake's Job, relies on the books of Law, saying:

Seek Truth, forsaking all other.
Honour thy father and mother.
Rule of Law and protection of the weak (ED)

These are the rigid, unchanging "Laws of peace, of love, of unity /of pity. compassion, forgiveness." (U. II:41-2) which Blake's Urizen inscribed in "The Book /of eternal brass"(U. II:41-2); they are the rigid moral codes which Blake sees as distorting Mankind's instinctive acceptance of true Christian love and forgiveness. Hughes shows the symbolic emptiness of these proffered excuses by his use of capital letters, thereby suggesting the protagonist's belief that just the mention of such powerful words can justify everything.

The protagonist's attempt at dialectic fails and he is forced to share in the ritual sacrifice which is made. This, by its nature (disembowelment with a cross-shaped cut) resembles the annual sacrifice of the Sun-king to the Goddess, which was once practised to ensure the continuance of the natural cycles of fertility.

Baskin's illustration, too, emphasises the symbolic nature of the sacrifice, showing the dismembered bird in a position which suggests crucifixion and which combines the 'Y' shape of the tree of life symbol (inverted to indicate death) with the 'T' of the Tau cross of generative power and change³².

So, the poem ends with the physical death which must precede a journey to the underworld:

When they covered his face I went cold.

Yet, there is every indication that this is but a prelude to re-birth as the powerful natural forces take their course.

'The interrogator'

'A Titled Vulturess' 33

The crime, which seems to be a form of murder, brings into question the death-penalty. The Interrogator for crimes involving death collects the evidence from the accused.

Like Grdhramukha, the corpse-eating, vulture-headed deity from the bardo, the interrogator now confronts the protagonist. She is the sun's agent, with the power and cruelty of the sun; "the sun's keyhole", through which it "spies" into the dark and barren "badlands" of the material world. Her 'titled' status links her with the gods, particularly with the vulture-headed goddess, Hathor, of The Egyptian Book of the Dead, who was the succouring Celestial Cow-goddess, wife/mother of the hawk-headed Sun God, Horus, and who was later identified by the Greeks with Astarte ³⁴. Hughes' vulturess is also connected with the vulture sent by Zeus to torment Prometheus.

Through the interrogator, the body is ransacked: "the camouflage of hunger", which is both the physical body (concealing the stomach and intestines) and the mask of the personality (which hides the instinctive appetites), is subjected to the sun's thorough and destructive investigation.

The interrogation proceeds in the only way in which a vulture can conduct an investigation. Yet, despite the graphic realism of the "grapnel" claws, the probing eyes and the tearing "prehensile" beak, this bird is also a spirit from "the courts of the after-life". Not only is she a terrifyingly real carrion-eating bird, she is also an "Efreet", a spirit of the "ether". Her "evidence" is the bloody remains of the "upside-down corpse" of the spiritual energies which the protagonist has devoured in his egotistical hunger. In an earlier version of the poem this last point is made more strongly:

The sun spies through her

...

Into the masks and amnesias

Of ego (ED).

It is the shell of the body, the 'mask', which this interrogator investigates and which "Her olfactory X-ray" penetrates, but this is not all that there is of Man. Hughes suggests this by his use of the generic term in the first line of the poem: it is "the stare-boned mule of man" which is to be interrogated, not, specifically, this stare-boned mule of a man. So, it is an aspect of human personality which is under examination rather than the behaviour of a particular man. The phrase "stare-boned", too, captures the gaunt insubstantiality of the physical body which is a human being's "concrete shadow", whilst the paronomasia with 'stubborn' emphasises the mule-like qualities of the personality in question.

An earlier draft of the poem more clearly implies the vulture's search for some spiritual, non-physical quality in the protagonist when it speaks of an 'arsenic trace', which is a common alchemical symbol for the soul:

And she will be raking the bowels for an arsenic trace

Of being at all (ED).

As the physical body dies, and the eyes glaze over and 'chill', only the fearful shape of the interrogator flickers before them, searching for some hint of continuing existence.

Baskin's drawing for this poem emphasises the paradoxical blackness of this spirit from the sun. The realistic head and the hunched attitude of his bird are vividly vulture-like but the imaginative impression given by the picture links it strongly with the poem: the 'humped robe', the bloody instruments used in the interrogation and the aggressive attitude, are all apparent.

'Actaeon' (THCP 558)

In this poem, for the first time, we see very clearly what Hughes described in his letter as the "human scenario" with the "disintegration of the female and the anaesthetised alienation of the male"³⁵. For the first time, too, the enraged energies are personified in the form of a woman.

Only one other poem in the sequence, 'Something was happening'(CB.30), links a man and woman in a similar domestic setting and gives the woman a human body and face (which is still "unrecognisable"). Both poems seem almost extraneous to the main action of the sequence; both seem to be additional, rather than integral, to the train of events³⁶. They are, however, deliberately presented in this way so that they form, as Hughes puts it, a "static tableau" which shows a human parallel to the "phase of the relationship, between male and female, which is being dealt with, at that point, in the judgement of the birds"³⁷.

Both the owl-like bird in 'The plaintiff' and the woman in 'Actaeon' are manifestations of Diana/Artemis, the Goddess of Nature. In 'Actaeon', the outraged Goddess appears in human form and her relationship to the protagonist (Actaeon) is made apparent by the

way in which it is her face from which the hounds emerge to tear him to pieces (in the Greek myth the hounds belonged to Actaeon). The “leaves and petals of his body” form a link, too, with the leafy feathers of the bird in ‘The plaintiff’ which is described as the protagonist’s “heart’s winged flower”. The conflation of the male/female identities in both poems makes it apparent that we are being shown two aspects of a single being.

The reason that Actaeon, here, cannot see his destroyer’s face is because his own is a “blank”. Her hair is “Like his own” and “her voice / Which was a comfortable wallpaper” becomes, at the end of the poem, his voice, still “decorating the floor”. Only the contrasting imagery shows us the different nature of each persona. He thinks in terms of furniture, gadgets, carpets and Hoover dust, “Staring, seeing nothing, feeling nothing”: her hands “produced food naturally” (a nicely ambiguous phrase) and her energy becomes “zig-zagging hounds” ranging the hills.

The merged identity of Actaeon and Diana, and the consequent self-devouring nature of the hounds’ attack, not only reflect the destructive aspects of love (such as Hughes dealt with in ‘A Modest Proposal’(THCP.27), ‘Lovesong’(THCP.255), and ‘The lovepet’(THCP550–2)), they are also important alchemical conventions. The ‘marriage’ of opposites – male and female, king and queen, sun and moon, Mercury and Sulphur – is an essential part of the alchemical synthesis, as is the self-devouring nature of Mercury, symbolised by the tail-eating dragon, Uroborus. Similarly, just as the alchemical process is cyclic and repetitive, so this poem describes, once again, dismemberment and death. Perhaps, however, Hughes decided that he had already made this point sufficiently in the earlier poems. He may also have felt that the overt use of Greek mythology in this poem did not sit well amongst his bird-beings and his less explicit blending of diverse mythologies in the rest of the sequence. For whatever reason, the poem was omitted from the published sequences.

‘She seemed so considerate’

Convinced of his guilt, the (protagonist) hero wishes only to understand it. But he is mystified: the Interrogator seems to be offering him an ambiguous atonement.

The vulture, as well as being a carrion eater, is a sacred bird. She is dedicated to the Great Goddess who, in her triple forms, is not only the feared goddess of death but also the Mother Goddess of fertility and of re-birth. As the representative of the Mother Goddess, the vulture, in ancient Egypt, was regarded as a compassionate purifier. In this poem, her compassionate role is paramount – she is

... the one creature

Who never harmed any living thing.

There are indications, now, that the enlightenment of the protagonist has begun. For the first time he sees and feels the horror around him, and he has moved, spiritually, beyond his friends so that he is able to see their “decay”, which has also been his own. They have become

... like dead things I’d left in a bag

And had forgotten to get rid of.

The odour of death begins to pervade the poem. On his own hand, the protagonist smells “putrefying meat”(ED) and the process of self–accusation, the alchemical mortification and putrefaction, has begun.

There are close analogies between this poem, the Biblical ‘Book of Job’, and Blake’s version of the story of Job. Like Job’s friends who “come to mourn with him and to comfort him” (‘The Book of Job’.II:11), the protagonist’s friends either sit, as if in judgement, being “twice as solemn” or they refuse to take him seriously. In The Bible, Job calls these friends “forgers of lies” and “physicians of no value”(Job.XIII:4); they are “mockers” who have “hid their heart from understanding”(Job.XVII:2,4) and he repudiates them. Blake, in his Job illustrations, depicts Job’s friends as self–righteous and accusing (Plate 10, below): these “corporeal friends are spiritual enemies” (Jer.Pl.44:10) and Blake surrounds his illustration of them with chained angels and “the cuckoo of slander, the owl of false wisdom, and the adder of hate”³⁸.

Just as Hughes’ protagonist bites the back of his hand in mortification so the Biblical Job performs a similar action: “Wherefore do I take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in mine hand? ”(Job.XIII:14). His transgression, too, is “sealed up in a bag” (Job.XIV:17), acknowledged and ready to be left behind.

Job Plate 10

Similarly, Blake’s Job, in the moment of enlightenment which Blake illustrated in Plate 9, acknowledges the rebuke of Eliphaz as a reflection of his own self–righteousness:

Shall mortal Man be more Just than God?

Shall a man be more Pure than his Maker?

In each case, after the fear and horror there comes recognition and acknowledgement of Man’s proud self-delusion.

Hughes’ protagonist, in his “voluntary solitary conflict”(ED), turns from his human friends to a plant. However, his relationship with even this “fellow creature”(as he calls it) is unequal and selfish: he treats it as his pet. With the death of this plant, the last element of the protagonist’s old egotistical world is stripped away. His response to this “dramatic’ moment is a melodramatic statement:

I felt life had decided to cancel me

(The same as it did with the sabre–tooth !(ED))

As if it saw better hope for itself elsewhere.

In contrast to his earlier assurance, the protagonist now feels that his place in the universe is threatened but the egocentric tone of his statement indicates how far from perfection he still is. The external forms of his world may have gone but a certain arrogance still remains in his personality.

Resigned and acquiescent, the protagonist accepts the motherly comfort which the

interrogator offers and enters her embrace with relief. In the last two lines of the poem the two physical manifestations of the protagonist are again united: and Baskin's illustration shows him bowed and flower-like, in the attitude of a bird sheltering an egg. He is wounded, perhaps mortally so, but uncrushed and the womb-like shape of the illustration conveys, also, the potential for re-birth which is suggested in the final line of the poem:

Whether dead or unborn, I did not care.

'The judge'

'Spider Piranha'/'An Oven-Ready Piranha Bird'(ED)

'An Oven-Ready Piranha Bird'39

Partaking of both cockerel(s) (?heaven or hood) and eagle(s) (?heaven or hood)(ED)) the visible representative of Natural Law does not partake of its splendour.

In this poem Hughes makes perhaps his strongest statement yet against a purely rational approach to life. His choice of phrases and symbols again provides links with Blake, and again he endorses Blake's views of the distortion which the adoption of 'unalterable' moral codes brings into our lives.

Hughes' Judge, wielding his god-like power in his "starry" geometrical web, reminds us of Blake's comment that "The Gods of Greece and Egypt were Mathematical Diagrams"⁴⁰. The stars, too, are fixed in his web like Blake's fixed stars of Reason. Squatting against this mathematical backdrop, like a grotesque character in a morality play, the judge is an obscene example of the lengths to which Man's pride may take him. His power is based on the arrogant belief that human beings are capable of correctly interpreting the laws of Nature and of using them to formulate ethical codes by which to judge their fellows.

Like the Emperor Nero, who was renowned as an egotistical, physically repulsive and ludicrous buffoon, this "Clowning, half-imbecile" creature has the power of life and death over those who come before him. This "representative of Natural Law", restricted by (or, as Hughes ambiguously puts it, "Hung with") the precedents recorded in the books of Law, acts as

...the filter across ...

the word of God, to keep it pure, untainted, and stainless (ED).

Like a voracious cosmic spider, lolling about his court (which is both a judgement court and a banqueting court), the judge indulges his gluttony "for the crimes of others" (ED). Pondering and ponderous, his gross figure teeters and wobbles as he plays his unbalanced role, suppressing all who do not conform to his codes. Indulging his self-centred, destructive, reason-governed appetite he is deaf to all but "his digestion and the solar silence".

Unlike the impartial keeper of the scales in the Judgement Hall of the Egyptian dead, Hughes' Judge resembles, rather, hybrid monster, Amemet – 'The Eater of the Dead', who sits beside the scales to devour the hearts of those who fail the gods' test⁴¹.

Baskin depicts the judge with a plucked, featherless, obese body ("oven-ready"), great raptorial claws, stunted wings and a ridiculously small head. There is a marked resemblance between this creature and the protagonist of 'In these fading moments', from whose mind, of course, he emanates. It seems that just as Blake's Job created God and the Seven Eyes of God (including Elohim, the judge) in his own image (cf. the faces and attitudes of God and Job in Plate 5. for example). So Hughes' protagonist has fashioned his own judge to conform with the chanced self-image which his accusers have produced in him.

'Your mother's bones'

'Unfortunately for You'(ED)

It seems to the protagonist that the court is confusing his victim (who seemed to be his daemon (ED)) with some other personage, for whom he felt only love and concern.

This poem was included in sequence A and in the BBC broadcast of Cave Birds but it was omitted from the published sequences. It has been collected by Sagar and published as, 'Your Mother's bones wanted to speak, they could not', in The Achievement of Ted Hughes (p.348). In the Exeter drafts it exists in two very different forms, the earlier of which is entitled 'Unfortunately for You'. In both versions the protagonist is confronted with apparently incontrovertible evidence of his guilt.

The earlier version of the poem refers back to 'Actaeon' and it is the hounds of "the mother of creation" who lead the "winged furies" to the protagonist. As evidence of his crimes they carry "lumps of blood in their fists". In both versions of the poem, the protagonist's "paltriest words" and "fleetest imagination", used in argument against the "dumb" evidence with which he is confronted, serve only to further implicate him.

Hughes introductory note describing the protagonist's confusion as to the identity of his alleged victim constitutes a gloss on the texts. This confusion does not appear overtly in the poems, but hinges on the ambiguity of the word 'mother', which may be taken as referring to the Goddess as Mother Nature, or to the protagonist's own biological mother. The conflation of the Goddess with some very personal figure in the protagonist's life reflects the intimate connection which exists between the protagonist and the bird-beings which appear to him: they are visions which emanate from within him, prompted by his conscience and fashioned by his imagination.

'Two dreams in the cell'

These two poems, which are presented as a pair, appear only in the B sequence and have no accompanying notes. Both have been collected by Sagar and published in The Achievement of Ted Hughes (p.347). The first of the pair presents the protagonist as if facing interrogation by the Sun. The second, through obscure religious references, seems to show the Sun-being's mutilation to be the result of Mankind's repression of the early, nature-orientated religions by the introduction of the restrictive codes of a male god.

The first poem, with its references to “armour”, “fingers / Gauntleted[sic] with studded words” and “a vigil blade” forged by the sun, seems to look ahead to ‘The knight’ (CB.28). However, this dreamed knight’s weapons are of a quite different kind, and he, like the judge (CB.16), is constrained by words and reason. His brain is “buckled with fixed stars” and held “tight / In the status quo”. His world, like that of Mankind in Plato’s cave, is lit by reflection from the wall as he sits, “legs at east”⁴², awaiting the rising sun. This is his vigil, but although the blade across his knees is like the sun’s promise of renewed life, it is, also, the destructive weapon of a chivalric warrior, symbolic of the knight’s intention to uphold by force the codes of his belief.

Weighed down with such “obsolete armour” (‘The judge’ (CB.16)), the protagonist’s dreamed knight is yet connected by his spine (the living core of a man) to the earth: an essential part of him is still bound to the “sub-soil” of his subconscious from which his demons come to torment him.

The knight is transfixed, as if ready for sacrifice. This sacrificial imagery is carried into the second poem by the reference to Guy Fawkes, who is still ritually burned at the stake each November 5th in many parts of England. Guy Fawkes, however, is only the latest of a series of sacrificial figures who have traditionally been burned on the October/November Samhain bonfires which mark the end of the Celtic year. Samhain, like the Beltane festival in May, is essentially concerned with fertility rites and the Great Goddess. It is a time when the powers of Nature briefly have free reign in the world of Man.

Ritual sacrifice to appease the Great Goddess and ensure fertility for the new year was once a common Celtic practice, and it is the appeasement of the Goddess which is the common theme connecting the figures in the second of the protagonist’s dreams with the protagonist himself. Initially, Nebuchadnezzar, Guy Fawkes and St. John Chrysostom would seem to have nothing in common but all appear to have suffered because of oppression of the Goddess. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar and St. John Chrysostom, the argument for this view (presented below) is complex and obscure, which is perhaps why Hughes omitted these poems from the published and broadcast sequences.

Hughes’ poetic picture of Nebuchadnezzar is very like that shown in Blake’s etchings of this Babylonian king (MHH. Plate 24E43). Although a great king, Nebuchadnezzar suffered a period of insanity which is graphically described in The Bible:

... he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles’ feathers, and his nails like birds’ claws ⁴⁴.

Blake believed that this bestiality was a punishment for idolatry and materialism⁴⁵. He used Nebuchadnezzar as a symbol for oppression. Hughes, however, links Nebuchadnezzar’s suffering with the actions of St. John Chrysostom who, it is alleged in the poem, “stole a saintly kiss from God”’s mother”.

As in his poem 'Logos', (THCP.155) Hughes identifies God's mother with the Goddess⁴⁶. St. John Chrysostom (which means 'golden-mouthed') was renowned for his rhetorical powers, his rigid asceticism and his reforming zeal. His downfall was brought about by the Empress Eudoxia whom he initially supported and praised for her piety but later publicly denigrated as a 'Jezebel' for her love of luxury and personal adornment. Eudoxia, jealous of Chrysostom's popularity and power, brought about his banishment and ordered the harsh treatment which eventually resulted in his death. In Hughes' terms, we can see in these events the conflict between harsh religious codes of behaviour and the natural desires of the female who represents the Goddess.

Despite this connection, the relationship between these events and the madness of Nebuchadnezzar is problematic. Not only did Nebuchadnezzar predate Chrysostom by some nine centuries but, apart from the fact that he was a dreamer and a religious oppressor, there is no clear relationship between him and either the protagonist or the Goddess.

In the end, whilst the overall feeling of these two poems seems to reinforce the theme of the impotence of rigid codes of thought and behaviour in the face of Nature's vengeful powers, their inherent obscurities detract from their value to the sequence.

'The plaintiff'

'A Hermaphroditic Ephesian Owl'(ED)

'A Hermaphroditic Ephesian Owl'⁴⁷

His crime implicates him in wider and wider responsibilities. His victim takes on (a form which) is progressively more multiple and serious (deletion?) form (and a form) progressively more personal and inescapable forms. (Once again his victim is brought into court or rather something that has grown from the body of his victim, or rather victims, for it now seems that his victim is not simply his own daemon, or his mother, but a horde of aggressive ghosts, not excluding the many-breasted goddess herself. His crime is a (? sounding) hate – cheating his responsibility).(ED).

There are considerable differences between the broadcast (B sequence) and the published versions of this poem. In the former, Hughes turns to biblical and political symbols of repression for his imagery. Herod, Stalin, autos-da-fe and death camps are used to describe to the protagonist the enormity of his crime and the cruel hypocrisy of his self-deception. Blood and horror abound, and the creature which appears before him is "a holy creature of wounds", a bloody "festering which your unconcern/Left to Mother Nature", but which now, "engrossed in your image" is "come to supplant you"(ED).

In contrast, the poem in the published edition of *Cave Birds* has quite a different tone. Although the pain and the wounds are still apparent, there is also life, and beauty, and warmth. The bird in this poem "is the bird of light!", "Your smile's shadow". She is no longer just "a bush of wounds" as in the broadcast poem, she is also "the life-divining bush of your desert". Her feet, which were "as cold as anchors", have become living "Roots".

The terrifying, humbling aspect of the plaintiff remains the same in both poems, but in the published version she is much more than just “your blood–red flower”. Instead, as “Your heart’s winged flower“, she embodies the heart’s desires and hopes as well as its connections with life and blood.

The title of Baskin’s illustration, as well as Hughes’ introductory reference to “the many–breasted goddess”, makes it clear that the plaintiff is the virgin huntress, Artemis, who was worshipped by the Ephesians 48. She is Mother Goddess, Moon Goddess of fertility, child of Isis and Dionysus and twin of the Sun–god Apollo. Like Diana, Hecate, Calypso and the many other forms of the Great Goddess, Artemis’ oracle bird is the owl – a bird of night, an omen of death and a bird of wisdom.

The owl symbolises the contradictory nature of the Goddess who controls birth and death and who can be both loving and vengeful. In ‘The plaintiff’, she embodies the contradictions of the protagonist’s paradoxical, unintentional harbouring of this creature within his body. Her hermaphroditic state suggests that she is the female part, the twin, of the protagonist himself. She is, too, the protagonist’s unconscious wisdom which will ultimately be his salvation.

Despite the overt reference to Artemis, the bird in Hughes’ poem has attributes which strongly suggest that an owl–goddess from his own native mythologies was influencing his writing. Hughes once remarked that the “deities of our instinct and ancestral memory”, the figures which are at the “roots” of an English writer or reader’s “genuine imagination”, are the deities of the Anglo–Saxon–Norse–Celtic mythologies. These gods he wrote of as being “much deeper in us, and truer to us, than the Greek-Roman pantheons that came in with Christianity”49.

So, perhaps it is not surprising that Hughes’ owl–goddess is very like Blodeuwedd, the owl–goddess of the Welsh Mabinogion 50. Just as Blodeuwedd was created by the magician, Math, from nine sacred flowers, so Hughes’ owl is a winged flower, with feathers like leaves and feet like roots. Just as Blodeuwedd was responsible for the death of her consort, Llew Llaw Gyffes, so the plaintiff has “Come to supplant” Hughes’ hero, who will subsequently, like Llew, be re–born51 . Blodeuwedd and Llew, like Artemis and Apollo, are the moon and the sun, the owl and the eagle, the twin aspects of Nature and (here) the twin elements of the protagonist’s personality.

The intrusion of Celtic mythology into these poems is not insignificant. for in the process of replacing Artemis and her bloodthirsty hound–pack with Blodeuwedd (flower–face), Hughes has brought warm elements of Celtic magic and enchantment into the poem. Moonlight, flames, leaves and flowers have beautifully supplanted blood, horror and destruction.

‘In these fading moments I wanted to say’

‘I called’(ED)

He comprehends some contradictions of his guilty innocence, and of his innocent guilt.

In the unpublished (B sequence) versions of this poem, the anaesthetised state of the protagonist is spelt out. He tries “to feel death” and “to feel life”, but he only feels distanced from the horrors he confronts. The animals accuse him or ignore him; his greatest shout is swallowed in a vast silence; and, as in the published version, the earth itself turns away from him and rejects him.

The published (A sequence) version presents a more complex argument. Like the dead who entered the Egyptian Halls of Judgement of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys (The Double Maati – sisters of Osiris), the protagonist offers a ‘Negative Confession’. In Egypt, a ‘Negative Confession’ was a ritual assertion by the dead person that certain sins had not been committed and that certain beneficent acts had been performed⁵². Hughes’ protagonist pleads “imbecile” innocence, setting himself apart from the horrors he relates so that he cannot be held responsible for them. His actions and emotions are those of an uninvolved observer. At the same time, the hyperbole of the phrases in which he describes his feelings marks them as the platitudes of social convention. He cries “unspeakable outcry” and feels “excess delight”: and even a small animal’s death “Lifts the head off” him. These are the sort of phrases which people use to imply their empathy with suffering whilst remaining aloof from it. They are very like the pleas which Job made and which Blake used to frame his fifth illustration of Job’s story (Plate 5, above): “Did I not weep for him who was in trouble. Was not my soul afflicted for the poor”.

In each case the pleas are no more than the excuses of one who can “put on righteousness” like a cloak (Job.XXIX:14), and they expose the self-righteous attitudes of those who make them.

Baskin’s drawing of the protagonist at this moment conveys all the blind arrogance of his condition. Standing naked before his judges, with his tiny head held aloofly (and ridiculously) in the air, he has the same gross body and raptorial claws which symbolised the judge’s greed; and his stunted wings indicate his unimaginative, Earth-bound state.

Whilst the protagonist makes his excuses, the plaintiff (who is, at once, the Great Goddess, Wife, Mother, Woman and Nature) continues to reiterate his guilt. As the “slip and trickle” of the anaesthetic ice which has imprisoned her becomes first “The snow-melt”, and then “brown bulging swirls”, we see the muddy chaotic waters of the protagonist’s subconscious surfacing and growing in strength. The final image of the poem suggests a human female turning her back on her male bed-mate, just as the plaintiff (the female element within the protagonist) displays her dominance over the protagonist. At the same time, the image captures the great natural upheaval which, in “The whole earth”, heralds the coming generative turmoil of springtime after the frozen stillness of winter:

The whole earth
Had turned in its bed

To the wall.

'The executioner'

'A Raven of Ravens'⁵³

He is sentenced to death. The Raven of Ravens takes possession of him

Just as Baskin's black bird fills the page opposite the poem, Hughes' executioner gradually fills the world of his protagonist with darkness. His black shape moves across the face of the waters like the Spirit of God in Genesis(1:2) but he brings darkness, not light; chaos not order. He is the Raven, the oracular bird of all the mythological Sun gods, and Hughes (in the introduction to his next poem) identifies him as the Sun-god in his "aspect of judgement". His poison, however, is that of the Great Goddess in her destructive form of Hecate.

With slow, repetitious measures the poem emulates the slow action of hemlock's poison, tracing the gradual spread of the darkness as it obliterates first, the natural world and then, the protagonist. Imitating the path of hemlock-induced numbness in the body, the darkness begins at the protagonist's feet and creeps slowly upwards until only his mind remains active.

Hemlock's pattern of action is reflected elsewhere in descriptions of spiritual/sacrificial death, most notably in the Biblical description of Job's trials. Tormented by Satan, whose nature is both destructive and, as Lucifer – the light bearer, creative, Job is smitten "with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown"(Job.II:7). To see the parallel with hemlock in the pattern of this affliction it is only necessary to recall the common belief that boils result from poisons in the body. The death by poison which precedes spiritual rebirth takes, it seems, a very specific path in human beings: beginning with the death of feeling – the loss of awareness of the Earth beneath the feet – it moves inexorably towards the final surrender of intellect and of Spirit. Another example of this is offered by Eliot in Four Quartets where the "absolute paternal care" of the Saviour, like the ministrations of Hughes' Sun-god/Raven, brings a death in which, again, "The chill ascends from feet to knees"⁵⁴.

In Ancient Greece, hemlock was the poison chosen to dispose of convicted criminals. It was, therefore, the poison which Socrates was condemned to take. Plato's description of Socrates' last hours details the slow spread of the poison through his body until death ensues⁵⁵. It describes, too, the sorrow which fills those friends who remain with Socrates and watch him drink the poison draught. Recalling this moment, Plato wrote:

hitherto most of us had been fairly able to control our sorrow: but now when we saw him drinking and saw too that he had finished the draught, we could no longer forbear, and in spite of myself my own tears were flowing fast; so that I covered my face and wept⁵⁶
Just so, does the protagonist see the darkness "filling the eyes of" his friends. As the numbness fills him he feels that his body is no longer his own; that he has become a part of his executioner. Yet, this is not just an end, it is also a beginning. The presaged re-birth is suggested strongly in the final two lines of the poem in which the protagonist's state of unbeing is described as feeling

... like the world

Before your eyes ever opened.

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Stage One of the Alchemical Synthesis

Calcination, Mortification, Putrefaction, Nigredo

The immortal soul is the invisible celestial fire¹.

Gerhard Dorn

The alchemical synthesis begins with 'Base Matter' or 'Raw Stuff', which is a mixture of substances, a chaos in which the prima materia (the pure original matter and energy of the Source) lies concealed. This 'Base Matter' is the 'lead' (the densest and basest of metals) from which the alchemical 'gold' will be made. It comes under the astrological sign of Saturn (♄) and, for the Alchemist, its spiritual parallel is "the chaotic immersion of consciousness in the body"². Saturn, according to Burckhardt, represents the human intellect in its capacity for knowledge, as opposed to its capacity for understanding.

In *Cave Birds*, the first stage of the alchemical synthesis extends from 'The scream' to 'The executioner', and the 'Base Matter' with which the synthesis begins is the protagonist. His "Flesh of bronze, stirred with a bronze thirst" (CB.7), and his "bronze image" (CB.8), signify some small progress from the original chaotic state of the human organism, for bronze is a lead/copper mixture which symbolically combines Saturn and Venus, Intellect and Spirit. The protagonist, therefore, has knowledge but not understanding.

He sees the beauties and horrors around him but, because of his rational abilities, he feels himself to be superior to the forces of Nature which govern these things. It is this arrogance and pride which will be his downfall. Hidden within him, however, is an element of Spirit through which the long journey towards understanding may begin. This is the divine element in human nature, the prima materia through which spiritual transmutation may be achieved.

The first procedure undertaken by the Alchemist is one of gentle heating: Calcination. During this heating, the first separation of Mercury from Sulphur occurs³. Next, the elements are re-combined so that, by the destructive power of Mercury, the matter is gradually broken down and brought into solution. Metaphorically, this is 'The First Death', the first cleansing of the 'Base Matter' during which it undergoes 'Mortification and Putrefaction'. This first stage ends in a return to chaos which is symbolised by a

blackness that Alchemists call the nigredo or the 'Raven's Head'.

Spiritually, the first alchemical stage is paralleled by an awakening of awareness or consciousness in the 'Base Matter' of the human being. It corresponds to the first examination of the inner world and it is often accompanied by the first stirrings of conscience. In Hughes' own life, one might regard his early apprehension of the intrinsic value of animal life as just such an initial awakening. For his *Cave Birds* protagonist, however, the situation is more complex and traumatic.

The 'Spirit' which erupts from within the protagonist to begin the work of transmutation is unrecognised and resisted by him but, through the persistent 'heat' of its accusations, his self-consciousness begins. By this means, the 'Base Matter' of the protagonist is gradually broken down, he is 'mortified' and, as he begins to lose his insensitive and arrogant facade, he enters a state of confusion and blackness. This state, which corresponds to the nigredo, is represented in the poetic sequence by 'The executioner' – a raven, like the bird in Baskin's powerful drawing which accompanies this poem.

In psychological terms, Jung likens the first stage of the alchemical work "to the encounter with the shadow" (MC.497) which represents a psychic split. The emphasis on light and shadow, dream and reality in 'The scream' and 'The summoner' may certainly suggest such an encounter, but the shadow also has mythical and folkloric associations with the Underworld and with the Soul, both of which are of great importance in Hughes' cave drama. The summoner, therefore, is equally an eruption from the suppressed sub-conscious energies of the protagonist and an appearance of Hermes/Mercury, the summoner and psychopomp who traditionally guides the Soul on the journey to the Underworld.

Mercury, the summoner, the alchemical divine spirit in 'Base Matter', appears in the early *Cave Birds* poems in several different emanations all of which prod, probe, pull apart and devour the material aspect of the protagonist. The solution in which this destruction takes place known to Alchemists as 'the menstruum' which devours the lifeblood containing the seed of re-birth: Mercury is the menstruum⁴, it is also "the water which teareth the Bodies, and makes them no Bodies"⁵. So, in *Cave Birds* it appears as the "blood-eating" summoner (CB.8), and as the vulture, "the blood-louse / of ether"(CB.12), the agent of bodily destruction.

Alchemically, such destruction is necessary, for "Unless the bodies lose their corporeal nature and become spirit, we shall make no progress in our work. The solution of the body takes place through the operation of the spirit..."⁶.

Following the first separation of Spirit from Matter, Mercury, in the first gentle heat of the alchemical process, begins the destructive tasks of mortification and putrefaction through which the Sulphurous impurities of the 'Base Matter' are released.

Heat, at each stage of the alchemical process, is carefully controlled and four degrees of fire govern the four stages of the alchemical process. At this stage "the first degree so

gentle be that feeling may excel it [i.e. heat which may be handled... By this degree of fire and not by any other, our matter ought necessarily to be purified, dissolved, mortified and made black”⁷.

So, although the first encounters which the Cave Birds protagonist has with the bird-beings promote cold terror which “chills” him like “ether”(CB.12), and the mood of these first poems is rational and cool, there is warmth enough in the accusations to promote the flush and sweat of embarrassment and to begin the processes of guilt and mortification.

Following the mortification, or stripping down, comes the putrefaction which returns the body to a solution or a state of chaos. In Alchemy, this stage is known as ‘the return to the mother’ because it is the necessary preparation for the re-birth of the spirit in its first state of purification.

In Cave Birds, a change in the nature of the interrogating vulture signals the change from mortification to putrefaction in the alchemical process. From being a bird of destruction in ‘The interrogator’, she becomes a comforting angel in ‘She seemed so considerate’:

‘Wings’, I thought, ‘Is this an angel?’ (ED).

Symbolically, this second ‘vulture poem’ presents the protagonist’s return to the mother and the necessary surrender of will which spiritual teachings regard as part of the return to the womb prior to rebirth.

Such symbolism has Natural parallels, and underlying the symbols which Alchemists use to describe the process of putrefaction are the fertility cycles of Nature, for, as the Alchemist, George Ripley, wrote:

... without the graine of wheate
Dye in the ground, encrease maist thou none get.

And in likewise without the matter putrifie,
It may in no wise truly be alterate ⁸.
Burial and Rebirth

In Alchemy, therefore, it is an established principle that without putrefaction “no seed may multiply”⁹ and that there can be “no generation without corruption”¹⁰.

Just as Hughes’ vulture is a black agent of the sun, so the darkness of putrefaction is often represented in alchemical texts by a black sun (Sol niger). In practical Alchemy, the whole process involves a slow, progressive darkening of the substance, which is kept in a sealed vessel (the Philosophers’ Egg) at a constant gentle heat. Eventually, “a black colour and a fetid smell” indicate that the “deadly poison” of the “Raven’s Head”¹¹ has been obtained and the first stage of the work is complete.

Within the Philosopher’s Egg, the separated Sulphur and Mercury of the body are

recombined and dissolved in a liquid nigredo. The Cave Birds poems, 'The plaintiff' and 'In these fading moments...', present again two aspects of the protagonist which are, respectively, a dry, burning, Sulphurous aspect and a cool, Mercurial aspect. Each has already been purged of some imperfections. The Sulphur which remains now is the inner Sulphur, the Soul. But the Mercury is, as yet, impure, for although the mask of arrogance has been destroyed, the protagonist still attempts to exonerate himself by a cool, rational plea of "imbecile" innocence (CB.20).

At the end of 'In these fading moments...', as Nature's world darkens with the snow-melt and the muddy, swirling rivers of a pre-generative chaos akin to putrefaction, she rejects the protagonist's plea. He is condemned to the poison of the Raven of Ravens ("his hemlock"(CB. 22)) which engulfs him in the total blackness of the pre-birth world, and the return to the mother is completed.

* * * * *

'The scream'

'I was just walking along' (ED)

The (protagonist) hero, in the decent piety of his innocence, is surprised. What has he failed to take account of ?¹²

In 'The scream' Hughes suggests the blind incomprehension and self-deception – the unenlightened chaos – of his protagonist in terms which reflect common human attitudes. The situation he describes is the status quo from which the journey, the transmutation, must begin.

The protagonist, who later describes himself as an "imbecile innocent" ('In these fading moments I wanted to say'(CB.20)), is less innocent than he 'piously' believes¹³. He is one who lives in naive non-comprehension of his own nature: A "newborn babe" whose "Flesh of bronze" and "bronze thirst" link him with the degenerate mythological 'race of bronze' which, according to Ovid , was "more fierce and warlike, yet unstained by crime" than the first people made by the gods in the Golden Age¹⁴. Like us, he has fallen from his original state of innocence into the chaos of experience, and his bronze thirst inures him to violence and predisposes him to complacency and pride. He is child-like in his naivety but, as in Blake's 'Jerusalem',

The Infant Joy is beautiful, but its anatomy

Horrible ghast & deadly: Nought shalt thou find in it

But dark despair & everlasting brooding melancholy: (Jer.22:22–4).

The protagonist's world, too, is the Blakean world of experience in which Man's divided nature and his destructive presence are ubiquitous. It is our world: a world desensitised to Nature – a world in which life is crushed by the "inane weights of iron" which are Man's mechanical inventions. Its ills are symbolised by images of mutilated creatures: people and rabbits are crushed, "Calves heads all dew-bristled with blood" grin from counters, and the images and atmosphere suggest a threatening undercurrent of Dionysian energies which periodically erupt in bloody rituals of slaughter such as

Hughes depicts in Gaudete.

Amidst all this, however, the protagonist feels no sense of his own mortality and no responsibility for the deaths of other creatures. His is a mind “desensitised to the true nature of nature”¹⁵ and, for him, the world is as it always has been. His “childhood’s / Nursery picture”, “the sun on the wall”, is still there, co-existent with “my gravestone”, with which he “happily” shares his dreams¹⁶. He feels himself to be in a position of invulnerability. His self-delusion, like a “falsifying dream” of the Hawk in ‘Hawk Roosting’(THCP.68), allows him to feel “creaturely” bravery in the face of mechanical threats and to view destruction with equanimity from a detached, superior position on “the wheel of the galaxy”. Yet, it is this alienation from Nature, this lack of understanding of his own place in the Natural world, which is the very substance of his guilt. Like Socrates, the arch rationalist with whom Hughes identifies him, he will later defend such beliefs with rational argument. Now, however, the enduring and powerful forces of Nature (exemplified in the poem by the hawk, the mountains, the worms and the newborn baby) make their inevitable intrusion into his life and demand his submission.

The unexpected, seemingly inexplicable, and horrifying events which occur in the life of the Cave Birds protagonist resemble, in many respects, those which are described in the biblical account of the life of Job. Job, too, is pious, and the misfortunes and trials to which God subjects him are seemingly unwarranted. Yet, as Blake makes clear in the illustrations in which he interpreted Job’s story, Job, like Hughes’ protagonist, is guilty of complacency, pride and self-deception which distort his vision and deny him true knowledge of spiritual unity¹⁷.

Blake’s first picture of Job (Plate I, below) includes the biblical text which describes him as “perfect and upright”. Symbolically, however, Blake shows Job as a victim of ‘single vision’, cut off from imagination and feeling (the instruments which symbolise imagination hang unused in the tree). Similarly, in the first poem of the Cave Birds sequence, Hughes’ protagonist displays a superficial serenity which is undermined by certain other aspects of the overall description of him. As events proceed, the recognisable pattern of a journey of spiritual enlightenment becomes apparent in both stories, and the similarities of theme and treatment continue, but there are yet other details in Hughes’ handling of the Cave Birds story which make the connection between his ideas and those of Blake more certain

Job Plate 1

The foolish pride and brazen arrogance of Hughes’ protagonist are beautifully captured in the Baskin drawing for a later poem in the sequence, ‘The accused’(CB.24), which was earlier entitled, ‘Socrates’ Cock’(ED). At the same time, this picture of “A Tumbled Socratic Cock”¹⁸ connects the protagonist with mythological epic heroes such as Hercules, who is shown in the Durer etching, ‘Der Hercules’, “as wearing a cock’s comb or head of a rooster, on his head”¹⁹. Less well known, but more pertinent to this discussion, is Blake’s etching of his character, Hand, who is shown at the beginning of Chapter 4 of ‘Jerusalem’ (Jer. Pl.78) with a “ ‘ravining’ beak... and a cock’s comb”²⁰. Hand, the eldest of the twelve Sons of Albion, is the “Reasoning Spectre”. He is

described by Foster Damon as the source of “the whole materialistic system of war and of society” and as the destroyer “of all innocent joys [who] opposes love with cruelty”²¹. Hughes’ familiarity with this particular etching is most likely, since it occurs in Blake’s work immediately opposite a passage on which Hughes has based at least two poems, ‘Ballad from a Fairy Tale’(THCP.171) and ‘The Angel’(THCP.492):

among my valleys of the south
And saw a flame of fire, even as a Wheel
Of fire surrounding all the heavens: it went
From west to east against the current of
Creation, and devour’d all things in its loud
Fury & thundering course round heaven & earth.
By it the Sun was roll’d into an orb:
By it the Moon faded into a globe,
Travelling thro’ the night; for, from its dire
And restless fury, Man himself shrunk up
Into a little root a fathom long.

And I asked a Watcher & a Holy–One

Its Name; he answer’d: “It is the Wheel of Religion”. (Jer. Pl.77. 1–13).

Not only is Blake’s figure, Hand, suitably related in character to Hughes’ protagonist but he occurs in Blake’s work immediately after the passage, “To the Christians” (Jer. Pl.77). This outcry against the divisive form of Christianity which emphasises “Mental Studies and Performances” and despises “Art and Science”, is one which is echoed in Hughes’ own writings, especially in the Introduction and Note to A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse, where he decries the Calvinist influence which taught us to “divide nature, and especially love, the creative force of nature, into abstract good and physical evil”²².

One further point can be made concerning the relationship between Hand and the Cave Birds protagonist. The positioning of this particular etching of Hand in Blake’s poetic sequence, following, as it does, Blake’s vision of some fiery and violent change, makes it apparent that Hand, like Hughes’ protagonist, is about to experience such a change. Erdman, in fact, takes the cock’s comb on Hand’s head as “a symbol of morning” which metaphorically suggests that “the night of death ‘is far spent, the day is at hand’”²³. The nature of the change, both for Hand and for Hughes’ protagonist, is to be revolutionary, and Blake’s vision of the clash of “this terrible devouring sword / ... opposing Nature!” (Jer. Pl.77: 15–20) is also expressed in occult and fiery terms reminiscent of the imagery used by alchemists to describe allegorical dreams and visions.

Hughes’ protagonist, in his divided state, also opposes Nature. But his appetites, like those of “a newborn baby at the breast”, are still controlled by Nature. When he attempts to praise the world he becomes aware of a radical split within himself. One part of him, represented as “his mate” (who has, significantly, had some part of himself removed), in his half–coma, half understanding, manages a rigid “stone temple smile” and a raised hand – a mindless ritual of praise which appears in early drafts of the poem as:

He merely let his thoughts float away
Into the starry silence
Into the book of Job
Into the burial service
Into the yawn
That suddenly yelled ...

and:

I merely prayed, automatically:
'Blessed be the name of ...' (ED).

Within him, however, there has crystallised a hard, painful, fundamental truth which, like "A silent lump of volcanic glass", tears his "gullet" and vomits itself forth in a scream. So, with a suggestion of ritual sacrifice conveyed in the image of "an obsidian dagger", Hughes begins the breaking down of self-image which must precede any spiritual transformation. And, with this first indication of the horror which exists beneath the pious facade of the protagonist, the stage is set for 'The summoner' to appear.

'The summoner'

'A Hercules-in-the-Underworld Bird'²⁴

The hero's (protagonist's)²⁵ cockerel innocence, it turns out, somehow becomes his guilt – His own nature, finally, (the inescapable creature of his flesh and blood) brings him to court.

The summoner is essentially a part of the protagonist. He is the spectre from the subconscious mind, the daemon, the possessor of deep instinctive truths who has the potential to both destroy and save the protagonist.

He is analogous to 'Lucifer', the light bearer, who appears in Plate 5 of Blake's Illustration of the Book of Job under his other name, 'Satan', 'The Angel of the Divine Presence'. Satan/Lucifer, who is Job's summoner, is often, like Mercury, identified with the dragon of Chaos.

Job Plate 5

Satan/Lucifer is the first of Blake's 'Seven Eyes of God', seven states which Blake formulated to describe "the path of Experience which Job must tread" on his spiritual journey. In Blake's title page for his Illustrations of the Book of Job, these seven states are depicted as angels symbolically grouped to show the descent from the material state and re-ascent into the spiritual state. According to Foster Damon, Blake believed that

These seven States were divinely instituted so that man should mechanically be brought back to communion with God. In the epics, Blake's technical names for the Seven are Lucifer, Molech, Elohim, Shaddai, Pahad, Jehovah and Jesus. They represent Pride of Selfhood; the executioner; the judge; the Accuser; Horror at the

results; Perception of Evil; and finally the Revelation of the Good. This is Man's customary course through Experience 26.

It is readily apparent that the titles of some of the Cave Birds poems are identical with certain of Blake's seven States, and the connection between the 'cockrel innocence' of Hughes' protagonist and 'Lucifer' as 'Pride of Selfhood' is easily made through their shared blind arrogance. This connection is reinforced by Foster Damon's explanation that Blake

found Job's tragic flaw in [his] innocence. Supported by his material prosperity, he has never grown up spiritually, has never trod the path of Experience... Satan the Accuser dwells in his own brain. And this Satan is to usurp for a time the place of the true God 27.

As with Job's Satan, the summoner of Hughes' protagonist dwells within him. At night, when the conscious mind is at rest, this other self is a "Shadow stark on the wall", "Spectral, gigantified", accusatory. Just occasionally, like a glow of light, "an effulgence" in a leafy oakwood²⁸, it can be "glimpsed" in a more benign form. It is "your soul", "your protector", hidden deep beneath the mask of arrogance which is the "grotesque" brazen facade of the day-time self.

The only 'evidence' of the other's existence is "A sigh" (traditionally believed to be an exhalation of the Soul), or some half-remembered promptings which remain in the mind like left-over "rinds and empties". But, "sooner or later", this primitive, "blood-eating" self, which grows parasitically within, must be recognised and acknowledged as a part of the whole identity. The importance of this lesson and its relevance for all Mankind are indicated in Hughes' shift from first person narrative in 'The scream' to the use of an inclusive 'you' in 'The summoner'.

Although the summoner is your protector and your Soul, and although the soft, pleasing sounds and imagery of line 7 of the poem ("Among crinkling of oak-leaves – an effulgence") suggest his healing association with light, this figure from the subconscious is terrifying. He is an apocalyptic symbol of death, and in four cold, clipped lines Hughes captures the Mercurial paradox of protection and destruction which he embodies, describing him as:

The carapace
Of foreclosure

The cuticle
Of final arrest

Baskin's illustration shows a wingless bird with human genitals. It suitably portrays the dual nature of the Summoner, combining suggestions of the soft feathered body of a later illustration for 'A green mother' (CB.41) with a crow's head and the vicious looking leg spurs and claws of a raptor. Here, truly, we see "the grip" which cannot be avoided.

'The advocate'
'A Desert Bittern' / 'A Deep-wading Desert Bittern' (ED)

'A Deep Wading Desert Bittern'29

He is given some indication (The council for the opposition gives him some indication (ED)) of the nature of the charge. What is he guilty of exactly? Being alive? Or of some error in the use of his life.

In the Exeter drafts there are three quite different poems under this title. The one included in the A sequence was the version read at the Ilkley Festival and in the BBC broadcast of Cave Birds. Keith Sagar collected the broadcast version in The Achievement of Ted Hughes(p.346). None of the versions were included in the published sequences.

All three poems indicate that the protagonist's guilt does not lie simply in "being alive" but in the insensitive materialism in which he has indulged at the expense of the suppressed inner self³⁰.

The Advocate comes to redress the balance, listing the protagonist's sins and "Totting the count" (all versions):

Voice C: You corrupted the pure light
To put it to work.

...

Voice B: Not only did you borrow ... you stole.
C: You plundered ... with stretched mouth glistening.

A: You amassed, you wallowed in engrossment
B: With a bonfire unconcern for the screaming
In the cells (Version A).

All this continued until the inner self was a
... speechless upside-down corpse
Hanging at your back
Who has paid in kind (Version C).

The upside-down corpse is a common symbol in occult and mythological ritual. Odin, the Nordic sun-god, and the Greek Dionysus, were annually sacrificed in this position prior to their descent to the Underworld and their subsequent re-birth³¹. Like 'The Hanged Man' in the Tarot pack, the symbolism is of the overturning of the material world by the natural, emotional world; it is the symbolism of imminent revolution and change. In the poem, the Advocate (who has been the suspended inner energies of the protagonist) comes to begin the awakening and the revelation of the painful truth. He is, in one version, "like the piper/opening the mountain of oblivion". In others, he describes himself as

... the hypodermic. My first word
Will start the truth shining from your pores (Versions A, C).

Here I sit on your brow, like a mosquito

Totting the count (All versions).

So, like the “blood–louse” vulture, the mosquito–like Advocate will extract a blood–sacrifice from the protagonist in expiation of his guilt.

And, just as in the Alchemist’s fire “the body becomes moist and gives forth a kind of bloody sweat” (MC.40), so the first pricking of conscience produces the sweat of guilt and the disintegration of the bronze image begins.

‘After the first fright’

He is confronted in court with his victim. It is his own daemon, whom he sees now for the first time. (The protagonist realises he is out of his depth) He protests, as an honourable Platonist, thereby re–enacting his crime in front of the judges. He still cannot understand his guilt. He cannot understand the (decisive) sequence of cause and effect.

In order to undertake the journey to the Underworld, the human body must be transformed. The shamans of primitive groups achieve this by adopting the form of an animal: ordinary humans usually achieve it through death. In this poem, Hughes uses images of ritual death and transformation which are common in both mythological lore and spiritual doctrine. His protagonist, however, is being torn apart by an inner conflict.

As the revolution of the elements of personality continues, the suppressed natural energies are no longer under the control of the protagonist’s rational powers. He may argue his “way out of every thought anybody could think”, but he is unable to control his body and his emotions, or “the stopping and starting / Catherine wheel” in his belly “which seemed to have been nailed there to enlighten him”(ED).

The symbols of revolution are central to this poem. The fiery wheel of the sun and of Nature, like the wheel of torture on which St. Catherine was martyred, is turning and burning, and no rational ability in any creature can stop it.

Seeking to evade his guilt, the protagonist exacerbates the situation by denying his feelings and offering, as an ‘honourable Platonist’, rational, abstract arguments of explanation. Inevitably, each of his explanations for the status quo becomes a further mutilation of his daemon and hence of himself. In an exact representation of the Advocate’s accusation that the rational self has fed on the hidden daemon, ‘Civilisation’ and ‘Sanity’ (those excuses which are fundamental to our own rationale for our way of life) are vividly and graphically shown as causing the protagonist’s mutilation and death:

When I said: ‘Civilisation’,

He began to chop off his fingers and mourn.

When I said: ‘Sanity and again Sanity and above all Sanity,’

He dismembered himself with a cross–shaped cut.

In earlier drafts of the poem, the protagonist, like Blake’s Job, relies on the books of Law, saying:

Seek Truth, forsaking all other.

Honour thy father and mother.

Rule of Law and protection of the weak (ED)

These are the rigid, unchanging “Laws of peace, of love, of unity /of pity. compassion, forgiveness.” (U. II:41–2) which Blake’s Urizen inscribed in “The Book /of eternal brass”(U. II:41–2); they are the rigid moral codes which Blake sees as distorting Mankind’s instinctive acceptance of true Christian love and forgiveness. Hughes shows the symbolic emptiness of these proffered excuses by his use of capital letters, thereby suggesting the protagonist’s belief that just the mention of such powerful words can justify everything.

The protagonist’s attempt at dialectic fails and he is forced to share in the ritual sacrifice which is made. This, by its nature (disembowelment with a cross-shaped cut) resembles the annual sacrifice of the Sun-king to the Goddess, which was once practised to ensure the continuance of the natural cycles of fertility.

Baskin’s illustration, too, emphasises the symbolic nature of the sacrifice, showing the dismembered bird in a position which suggests crucifixion and which combines the ‘Y’ shape of the tree of life symbol (inverted to indicate death) with the ‘T’ of the Tau cross of generative power and change³².

So, the poem ends with the physical death which must precede a journey to the underworld:

When they covered his face I went cold.

Yet, there is every indication that this is but a prelude to re-birth as the powerful natural forces take their course.

‘The interrogator’

‘A Titled Vulturess’ 33

The crime, which seems to be a form of murder, brings into question the death-penalty. The Interrogator for crimes involving death collects the evidence from the accused.

Like Grdhramukha, the corpse-eating, vulture-headed deity from the bardo, the interrogator now confronts the protagonist. She is the sun’s agent, with the power and cruelty of the sun; “the sun’s keyhole”, through which it “spies” into the dark and barren “badlands” of the material world. Her ‘titled’ status links her with the gods, particularly with the vulture-headed goddess, Hathor, of The Egyptian Book of the Dead, who was the succouring Celestial Cow-goddess, wife/mother of the hawk-headed Sun God, Horus, and who was later identified by the Greeks with Astarte ³⁴. Hughes’ vulturess is also connected with the vulture sent by Zeus to torment Prometheus.

Through the interrogator, the body is ransacked: “ the camouflage of hunger”, which is both the physical body (concealing the stomach and intestines) and the mask of the personality (which hides the instinctive appetites), is subjected to the sun’s thorough and destructive investigation.

The interrogation proceeds in the only way in which a vulture can conduct an investigation. Yet, despite the graphic realism of the “grapnel” claws, the probing eyes and the tearing “prehensile” beak, this bird is also a spirit from “the courts of the after–life”. Not only is she a terrifyingly real carrion–eating bird, she is also an “Efreet”, a spirit of the “ether”. Her “evidence” is the bloody remains of the “upside–down corpse” of the spiritual energies which the protagonist has devoured in his egotistical hunger. In an earlier version of the poem this last point is made more strongly:

The sun spies through her

...

Into the masks and amnesias

Of ego (ED).

It is the shell of the body, the ‘mask’, which this interrogator investigates and which “Her olfactory X–ray” penetrates, but this is not all that there is of Man. Hughes suggests this by his use of the generic term in the first line of the poem: it is “the stare–boned mule of man” which is to be interrogated, not, specifically, this stare–boned mule of a man. So, it is an aspect of human personality which is under examination rather than the behaviour of a particular man. The phrase “stare–boned”, too, captures the gaunt insubstantiality of the physical body which is a human being’s “concrete shadow”, whilst the paronomasia with ‘stubborn’ emphasises the mule–like qualities of the personality in question.

An earlier draft of the poem more clearly implies the vulture’s search for some spiritual, non–physical quality in the protagonist when it speaks of an ‘arsenic trace’, which is a common alchemical symbol for the soul:

And she will be raking the bowels for an arsenic trace

Of being at all (ED).

As the physical body dies, and the eyes glaze over and ‘chill’, only the fearful shape of the interrogator flickers before them, searching for some hint of continuing existence.

Baskin’s drawing for this poem emphasises the paradoxical blackness of this spirit from the sun. The realistic head and the hunched attitude of his bird are vividly vulture–like but the imaginative impression given by the picture links it strongly with the poem: the ‘humped robe’, the bloody instruments used in the interrogation and the aggressive attitude, are all apparent.

‘Actaeon’ (THCP 558)

In this poem, for the first time, we see very clearly what Hughes described in his letter as the “human scenario” with the “disintegration of the female and the anaesthetised alienation of the male”³⁵. For the first time, too, the enraged energies are personified in the form of a woman.

Only one other poem in the sequence, ‘Something was happening’(CB.30), links a man and woman in a similar domestic setting and gives the woman a human body and face (which is still “unrecognisable”). Both poems seem almost extraneous to the main action

of the sequence; both seem to be additional, rather than integral, to the train of events³⁶. They are, however, deliberately presented in this way so that they form, as Hughes puts it, a “static tableau” which shows a human parallel to the “phase of the relationship, between male and female, which is being dealt with, at that point, in the judgement of the birds”³⁷.

Both the owl-like bird in ‘The plaintiff’ and the woman in ‘Actaeon’ are manifestations of Diana/Artemis, the Goddess of Nature. In ‘Actaeon’, the outraged Goddess appears in human form and her relationship to the protagonist (Actaeon) is made apparent by the way in which it is her face from which the hounds emerge to tear him to pieces (in the Greek myth the hounds belonged to Actaeon). The “leaves and petals of his body” form a link, too, with the leafy feathers of the bird in ‘The plaintiff’ which is described as the protagonist’s “heart’s winged flower”. The conflation of the male/female identities in both poems makes it apparent that we are being shown two aspects of a single being.

The reason that Actaeon, here, cannot see his destroyer’s face is because his own is a “blank”. Her hair is “Like his own” and “her voice / Which was a comfortable wallpaper” becomes, at the end of the poem, his voice, still “decorating the floor”. Only the contrasting imagery shows us the different nature of each persona. He thinks in terms of furniture, gadgets, carpets and Hoover dust, “Staring, seeing nothing, feeling nothing”: her hands “produced food naturally” (a nicely ambiguous phrase) and her energy becomes “zig-zagging hounds” ranging the hills.

The merged identity of Actaeon and Diana, and the consequent self-devouring nature of the hounds’ attack, not only reflect the destructive aspects of love (such as Hughes dealt with in ‘A Modest Proposal’(THCP.27), ‘Lovesong’(THCP.255), and ‘The lovepet’(THCP550–2)), they are also important alchemical conventions. The ‘marriage’ of opposites – male and female, king and queen, sun and moon, Mercury and Sulphur – is an essential part of the alchemical synthesis, as is the self-devouring nature of Mercury, symbolised by the tail-eating dragon, Uroborus. Similarly, just as the alchemical process is cyclic and repetitive, so this poem describes, once again, dismemberment and death. Perhaps, however, Hughes decided that he had already made this point sufficiently in the earlier poems. He may also have felt that the overt use of Greek mythology in this poem did not sit well amongst his bird-beings and his less explicit blending of diverse mythologies in the rest of the sequence. For whatever reason, the poem was omitted from the published sequences.

‘She seemed so considerate’

Convinced of his guilt, the (protagonist) hero wishes only to understand it. But he is mystified: the Interrogator seems to be offering him an ambiguous atonement.

The vulture, as well as being a carrion eater, is a sacred bird. She is dedicated to the Great Goddess who, in her triple forms, is not only the feared goddess of death but also the Mother Goddess of fertility and of re-birth. As the representative of the Mother Goddess, the vulture, in ancient Egypt, was regarded as a compassionate purifier. In this poem, her compassionate role is paramount – she is

... the one creature

Who never harmed any living thing.

There are indications, now, that the enlightenment of the protagonist has begun. For the first time he sees and feels the horror around him, and he has moved, spiritually, beyond his friends so that he is able to see their “decay”, which has also been his own. They have become

... like dead things I'd left in a bag

And had forgotten to get rid of.

The odour of death begins to pervade the poem. On his own hand, the protagonist smells “putrefying meat”(ED) and the process of self-accusation, the alchemical mortification and putrefaction, has begun.

There are close analogies between this poem, the Biblical ‘Book of Job’, and Blake’s version of the story of Job. Like Job’s friends who “come to mourn with him and to comfort him” (‘The Book of Job’.II:11), the protagonist’s friends either sit, as if in judgement, being “twice as solemn” or they refuse to take him seriously. In The Bible, Job calls these friends “forgers of lies” and “physicians of no value”(Job.XIII:4); they are “mockers” who have “hid their heart from understanding”(Job.XVII:2,4) and he repudiates them. Blake, in his Job illustrations, depicts Job’s friends as self-righteous and accusing (Plate 10, below): these “corporeal friends are spiritual enemies” (Jer.PI.44:10) and Blake surrounds his illustration of them with chained angels and “the cuckoo of slander, the owl of false wisdom, and the adder of hate”³⁸.

Just as Hughes’ protagonist bites the back of his hand in mortification so the Biblical Job performs a similar action: “Wherefore do I take my flesh in my teeth, and put my life in mine hand? ”(Job.XIII:14). His transgression, too, is “sealed up in a bag” (Job.XIV:17), acknowledged and ready to be left behind.

Job Plate 10

Similarly, Blake’s Job, in the moment of enlightenment which Blake illustrated in Plate 9, acknowledges the rebuke of Eliphaz as a reflection of his own self-righteousness:

Shall mortal Man be more Just than God?

Shall a man be more Pure than his Maker?

In each case, after the fear and horror there comes recognition and acknowledgement of Man’s proud self-delusion.

Hughes’ protagonist, in his “voluntary solitary conflict”(ED), turns from his human friends to a plant. However, his relationship with even this “fellow creature”(as he calls it) is unequal and selfish: he treats it as his pet. With the death of this plant, the last element of the protagonist’s old egotistical world is stripped away. His response to this “dramatic’ moment is a melodramatic statement:

I felt life had decided to cancel me

(The same as it did with the sabre-tooth !(ED))
As if it saw better hope for itself elsewhere.

In contrast to his earlier assurance, the protagonist now feels that his place in the universe is threatened but the egocentric tone of his statement indicates how far from perfection he still is. The external forms of his world may have gone but a certain arrogance still remains in his personality.

Resigned and acquiescent, the protagonist accepts the motherly comfort which the interrogator offers and enters her embrace with relief. In the last two lines of the poem the two physical manifestations of the protagonist are again united: and Baskin's illustration shows him bowed and flower-like, in the attitude of a bird sheltering an egg. He is wounded, perhaps mortally so, but uncrushed and the womb-like shape of the illustration conveys, also, the potential for re-birth which is suggested in the final line of the poem:

Whether dead or unborn, I did not care.

'The judge'

'Spider Piranha'/'An Oven-Ready Piranha Bird'(ED)

'An Oven-Ready Piranha Bird'39

Partaking of both cockerel(s) (?heaven or hood) and eagle(s) (?heaven or hood)(ED))
the visible representative of Natural Law does not partake of its splendour.

In this poem Hughes makes perhaps his strongest statement yet against a purely rational approach to life. His choice of phrases and symbols again provides links with Blake, and again he endorses Blake's views of the distortion which the adoption of 'unalterable' moral codes brings into our lives.

Hughes' Judge, wielding his god-like power in his "starry" geometrical web, reminds us of Blake's comment that "The Gods of Greece and Egypt were Mathematical Diagrams"⁴⁰. The stars, too, are fixed in his web like Blake's fixed stars of Reason. Squatting against this mathematical backdrop, like a grotesque character in a morality play, the judge is an obscene example of the lengths to which Man's pride may take him. His power is based on the arrogant belief that human beings are capable of correctly interpreting the laws of Nature and of using them to formulate ethical codes by which to judge their fellows.

Like the Emperor Nero, who was renowned as an egotistical, physically repulsive and ludicrous buffoon, this "Clowning, half-imbecile" creature has the power of life and death over those who come before him. This "representative of Natural Law", restricted by (or, as Hughes ambiguously puts it, "Hung with") the precedents recorded in the books of Law, acts as

...the filter across ...

the word of God, to keep it pure, untainted, and stainless (ED).

Like a voracious cosmic spider, lolling about his court (which is both a judgement court

and a banqueting court), the judge indulges his gluttony “for the crimes of others” (ED). Pondering and ponderous, his gross figure teeters and wobbles as he plays his unbalanced role, suppressing all who do not conform to his codes. Indulging his self-centred, destructive, reason-governed appetite he is deaf to all but “his digestion and the solar silence”.

Unlike the impartial keeper of the scales in the Judgement Hall of the Egyptian dead, Hughes’ Judge resembles, rather, hybrid monster, Amemet – ‘The Eater of the Dead’, who sits beside the scales to devour the hearts of those who fail the gods’ test⁴¹.

Baskin depicts the judge with a plucked, featherless, obese body (“oven-ready”), great raptorial claws, stunted wings and a ridiculously small head. There is a marked resemblance between this creature and the protagonist of ‘In these fading moments’, from whose mind, of course, he emanates. It seems that just as Blake’s Job created God and the Seven Eyes of God (including Elohim, the judge) in his own image (cf. the faces and attitudes of God and Job in Plate 5. for example). So Hughes’ protagonist has fashioned his own judge to conform with the chanced self-image which his accusers have produced in him.

‘Your mother’s bones’

‘Unfortunately for You’(ED)

It seems to the protagonist that the court is confusing his victim (who seemed to be his daemon (ED)) with some other personage, for whom he felt only love and concern.

This poem was included in sequence A and in the BBC broadcast of Cave Birds but it was omitted from the published sequences. It has been collected by Sagar and published as, ‘Your Mother’s bones wanted to speak, they could not’, in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (p.348). In the Exeter drafts it exists in two very different forms, the earlier of which is entitled ‘Unfortunately for You’. In both versions the protagonist is confronted with apparently incontrovertible evidence of his guilt.

The earlier version of the poem refers back to ‘Actaeon’ and it is the hounds of “the mother of creation” who lead the “winged furies” to the protagonist. As evidence of his crimes they carry “lumps of blood in their fists”. In both versions of the poem, the protagonist’s “palmiest words” and “fleetest imagination”, used in argument against the “dumb” evidence with which he is confronted, serve only to further implicate him.

Hughes introductory note describing the protagonist’s confusion as to the identity of his alleged victim constitutes a gloss on the texts. This confusion does not appear overtly in the poems, but hinges on the ambiguity of the word ‘mother’, which may be taken as referring to the Goddess as Mother Nature, or to the protagonist’s own biological mother. The conflation of the Goddess with some very personal figure in the protagonist’s life reflects the intimate connection which exists between the protagonist and the bird-beings which appear to him: they are visions which emanate from within him, prompted by his conscience and fashioned by his imagination.

'Two dreams in the cell'

These two poems, which are presented as a pair, appear only in the B sequence and have no accompanying notes. Both have been collected by Sagar and published in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (p.347). The first of the pair presents the protagonist as if facing interrogation by the Sun. The second, through obscure religious references, seems to show the Sun-being's mutilation to be the result of Mankind's repression of the early, nature-orientated religions by the introduction of the restrictive codes of a male god.

The first poem, with its references to "armour", "fingers / Gauntleted[sic] with studded words" and "a vigil blade" forged by the sun, seems to look ahead to 'The knight' (CB.28). However, this dreamed knight's weapons are of a quite different kind, and he, like the judge (CB.16), is constrained by words and reason. His brain is "buckled with fixed stars" and held "tight / In the status quo". His world, like that of Mankind in Plato's cave, is lit by reflection from the wall as he sits, "legs at east"⁴², awaiting the rising sun. This is his vigil, but although the blade across his knees is like the sun's promise of renewed life, it is, also, the destructive weapon of a chivalric warrior, symbolic of the knight's intention to uphold by force the codes of his belief.

Weighed down with such "obsolete armour" ('The judge' (CB.16)), the protagonist's dreamed knight is yet connected by his spine (the living core of a man) to the earth: an essential part of him is still bound to the "sub-soil" of his subconscious from which his demons come to torment him.

The knight is transfixed, as if ready for sacrifice. This sacrificial imagery is carried into the second poem by the reference to Guy Fawkes, who is still ritually burned at the stake each November 5th in many parts of England. Guy Fawkes, however, is only the latest of a series of sacrificial figures who have traditionally been burned on the October/November Samhain bonfires which mark the end of the Celtic year. Samhain, like the Beltane festival in May, is essentially concerned with fertility rites and the Great Goddess. It is a time when the powers of Nature briefly have free reign in the world of Man.

Ritual sacrifice to appease the Great Goddess and ensure fertility for the new year was once a common Celtic practice, and it is the appeasement of the Goddess which is the common theme connecting the figures in the second of the protagonist's dreams with the protagonist himself. Initially, Nebuchadnezzar, Guy Fawkes and St. John Chrysostom would seem to have nothing in common but all appear to have suffered because of oppression of the Goddess. In the case of Nebuchadnezzar and St. John Chrysostom, the argument for this view (presented below) is complex and obscure, which is perhaps why Hughes omitted these poems from the published and broadcast sequences.

Hughes' poetic picture of Nebuchadnezzar is very like that shown in Blake's etchings of this Babylonian king (MHH. Plate 24E43). Although a great king, Nebuchadnezzar suffered a period of insanity which is graphically described in *The Bible*:

... he was driven from men, and did eat grass as oxen, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven, till his hairs were grown like eagles' feathers, and his nails like birds' claws 44.

Blake believed that this bestiality was a punishment for idolatry and materialism⁴⁵. He used Nebuchadnezzar as a symbol for oppression. Hughes, however, links Nebuchadnezzar's suffering with the actions of St. John Chrysostom who, it is alleged in the poem, "stole a saintly kiss from God's mother".

As in his poem 'Logos', (THCP.155) Hughes identifies God's mother with the Goddess⁴⁶. St. John Chrysostom (which means 'golden-mouthed') was renowned for his rhetorical powers, his rigid asceticism and his reforming zeal. His downfall was brought about by the Empress Eudoxia whom he initially supported and praised for her piety but later publicly denigrated as a 'Jezebel' for her love of luxury and personal adornment. Eudoxia, jealous of Chrysostom's popularity and power, brought about his banishment and ordered the harsh treatment which eventually resulted in his death. In Hughes' terms, we can see in these events the conflict between harsh religious codes of behaviour and the natural desires of the female who represents the Goddess.

Despite this connection, the relationship between these events and the madness of Nebuchadnezzar is problematic. Not only did Nebuchadnezzar predate Chrysostom by some nine centuries but, apart from the fact that he was a dreamer and a religious oppressor, there is no clear relationship between him and either the protagonist or the Goddess.

In the end, whilst the overall feeling of these two poems seems to reinforce the theme of the impotence of rigid codes of thought and behaviour in the face of Nature's vengeful powers, their inherent obscurities detract from their value to the sequence.

'The plaintiff'

'A Hermaphroditic Ephesian Owl'(ED)

'A Hermaphroditic Ephesian Owl'⁴⁷

His crime implicates him in wider and wider responsibilities. His victim takes on (a form which) is progressively more multiple and serious (deletion?) form (and a form) progressively more personal and inescapable forms. (Once again his victim is brought into court or rather something that has grown from the body of his victim, or rather victims, for it now seems that his victim is not simply his own daemon, or his mother, but a horde of aggressive ghosts, not excluding the many-breasted goddess herself. His crime is a (? sounding) hate – cheating his responsibility).(ED).

There are considerable differences between the broadcast (B sequence) and the published versions of this poem. In the former, Hughes turns to biblical and political symbols of repression for his imagery. Herod, Stalin, autos-da-fe and death camps are used to describe to the protagonist the enormity of his crime and the cruel hypocrisy of his self-deception. Blood and horror abound, and the creature which appears before him is "a holy creature of wounds", a bloody "festering which your unconcern/Left to

Mother Nature", but which now, "engrossed in your image" is "come to supplant you"(ED).

In contrast, the poem in the published edition of *Cave Birds* has quite a different tone. Although the pain and the wounds are still apparent, there is also life, and beauty, and warmth. The bird in this poem "is the bird of light!", "Your smile's shadow". She is no longer just "a bush of wounds" as in the broadcast poem, she is also "the life-divining bush of your desert". Her feet, which were "as cold as anchors", have become living "Roots".

The terrifying, humbling aspect of the plaintiff remains the same in both poems, but in the published version she is much more than just "your blood-red flower". Instead, as "Your heart's winged flower", she embodies the heart's desires and hopes as well as its connections with life and blood.

The title of Baskin's illustration, as well as Hughes' introductory reference to "the many-breasted goddess", makes it clear that the plaintiff is the virgin huntress, Artemis, who was worshipped by the Ephesians⁴⁸. She is Mother Goddess, Moon Goddess of fertility, child of Isis and Dionysus and twin of the Sun-god Apollo. Like Diana, Hecate, Calypso and the many other forms of the Great Goddess, Artemis' oracle bird is the owl – a bird of night, an omen of death and a bird of wisdom.

The owl symbolises the contradictory nature of the Goddess who controls birth and death and who can be both loving and vengeful. In 'The plaintiff', she embodies the contradictions of the protagonist's paradoxical, unintentional harbouring of this creature within his body. Her hermaphroditic state suggests that she is the female part, the twin, of the protagonist himself. She is, too, the protagonist's unconscious wisdom which will ultimately be his salvation.

Despite the overt reference to Artemis, the bird in Hughes' poem has attributes which strongly suggest that an owl-goddess from his own native mythologies was influencing his writing. Hughes once remarked that the "deities of our instinct and ancestral memory", the figures which are at the "roots" of an English writer or reader's "genuine imagination", are the deities of the Anglo-Saxon-Norse-Celtic mythologies. These gods he wrote of as being "much deeper in us, and truer to us, than the Greek-Roman pantheons that came in with Christianity"⁴⁹.

So, perhaps it is not surprising that Hughes' owl-goddess is very like Blodeuwedd, the owl-goddess of the Welsh *Mabinogion*⁵⁰. Just as Blodeuwedd was created by the magician, Math, from nine sacred flowers, so Hughes' owl is a winged flower, with feathers like leaves and feet like roots. Just as Blodeuwedd was responsible for the death of her consort, Llew Llaw Gyffes, so the plaintiff has "Come to supplant" Hughes' hero, who will subsequently, like Llew, be re-born⁵¹. Blodeuwedd and Llew, like Artemis and Apollo, are the moon and the sun, the owl and the eagle, the twin aspects of Nature and (here) the twin elements of the protagonist's personality.

The intrusion of Celtic mythology into these poems is not insignificant. for in the process of replacing Artemis and her bloodthirsty hound–pack with Blodeuwedd (flower–face), Hughes has brought warm elements of Celtic magic and enchantment into the poem. Moonlight, flames, leaves and flowers have beautifully supplanted blood, horror and destruction.

‘In these fading moments I wanted to say’

‘I called’(ED)

He comprehends some contradictions of his guilty innocence, and of his innocent guilt.

In the unpublished (B sequence) versions of this poem, the anaesthetised state of the protagonist is spelt out. He tries “to feel death” and “to feel life”, but he only feels distanced from the horrors he confronts. The animals accuse him or ignore him; his greatest shout is swallowed in a vast silence; and, as in the published version, the earth itself turns away from him and rejects him.

The published (A sequence) version presents a more complex argument. Like the dead who entered the Egyptian Halls of Judgement of the goddesses Isis and Nephthys (The Double Maati – sisters of Osiris), the protagonist offers a ‘Negative Confession’. In Egypt, a ‘Negative Confession’ was a ritual assertion by the dead person that certain sins had not been committed and that certain beneficent acts had been performed⁵². Hughes’ protagonist pleads “imbecile” innocence, setting himself apart from the horrors he relates so that he cannot be held responsible for them. His actions and emotions are those of an uninvolved observer. At the same time, the hyperbole of the phrases in which he describes his feelings marks them as the platitudes of social convention. He cries “unspeakable outcry” and feels “excess delight”: and even a small animal’s death “Lifts the head off” him. These are the sort of phrases which people use to imply their empathy with suffering whilst remaining aloof from it. They are very like the pleas which Job made and which Blake used to frame his fifth illustration of Job’s story (Plate 5, above): “Did I not weep for him who was in trouble. Was not my soul afflicted for the poor”.

In each case the pleas are no more than the excuses of one who can “put on righteousness” like a cloak (Job.XXIX:14), and they expose the self–righteous attitudes of those who make them.

Baskin’s drawing of the protagonist at this moment conveys all the blind arrogance of his condition. Standing naked before his judges, with his tiny head held aloofly (and ridiculously) in the air, he has the same gross body and raptorial claws which symbolised the judge’s greed; and his stunted wings indicate his unimaginative, Earth–bound state.

Whilst the protagonist makes his excuses, the plaintiff (who is, at once, the Great Goddess, Wife, Mother, Woman and Nature) continues to reiterate his guilt. As the “slip and trickle” of the anaesthetic ice which has imprisoned her becomes first “The snow-melt”, and then “brown bulging swirls”, we see the muddy chaotic waters of the

protagonist's subconscious surfacing and growing in strength. The final image of the poem suggests a human female turning her back on her male bed-mate, just as the plaintiff (the female element within the protagonist) displays her dominance over the protagonist. At the same time, the image captures the great natural upheaval which, in "The whole earth", heralds the coming generative turmoil of springtime after the frozen stillness of winter:

The whole earth

Had turned in its bed

To the wall.

'The executioner'

'A Raven of Ravens'⁵³

He is sentenced to death. The Raven of Ravens takes possession of him

Just as Baskin's black bird fills the page opposite the poem, Hughes' executioner gradually fills the world of his protagonist with darkness. His black shape moves across the face of the waters like the Spirit of God in Genesis(1:2) but he brings darkness, not light; chaos not order. He is the Raven, the oracular bird of all the mythological Sun gods, and Hughes (in the introduction to his next poem) identifies him as the Sun-god in his "aspect of judgement". His poison, however, is that of the Great Goddess in her destructive form of Hecate.

With slow, repetitious measures the poem emulates the slow action of hemlock's poison, tracing the gradual spread of the darkness as it obliterates first, the natural world and then, the protagonist. Imitating the path of hemlock-induced numbness in the body, the darkness begins at the protagonist's feet and creeps slowly upwards until only his mind remains active.

Hemlock's pattern of action is reflected elsewhere in descriptions of spiritual/sacrificial death, most notably in the Biblical description of Job's trials. Tormented by Satan, whose nature is both destructive and, as Lucifer – the light bearer, creative, Job is smitten "with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown"(Job.II:7). To see the parallel with hemlock in the pattern of this affliction it is only necessary to recall the common belief that boils result from poisons in the body. The death by poison which precedes spiritual rebirth takes, it seems, a very specific path in human beings: beginning with the death of feeling – the loss of awareness of the Earth beneath the feet – it moves inexorably towards the final surrender of intellect and of Spirit. Another example of this is offered by Eliot in Four Quartets where the "absolute paternal care" of the Saviour, like the ministrations of Hughes' Sun-god/Raven, brings a death in which, again, "The chill ascends from feet to knees"⁵⁴.

In Ancient Greece, hemlock was the poison chosen to dispose of convicted criminals. It was, therefore, the poison which Socrates was condemned to take. Plato's description of Socrates' last hours details the slow spread of the poison through his body until death ensues⁵⁵. It describes, too, the sorrow which fills those friends who remain with Socrates and watch him drink the poison draught. Recalling this moment, Plato wrote:

hitherto most of us had been fairly able to control our sorrow: but now when we saw him drinking and saw too that he had finished the draught, we could no longer forbear, and in spite of myself my own tears were flowing fast; so that I covered my face and wept⁵⁶ Just so, does the protagonist see the darkness “filling the eyes of” his friends. As the numbness fills him he feels that his body is no longer his own; that he has become a part of his executioner. Yet, this is not just an end, it is also a beginning. The presaged re-birth is suggested strongly in the final two lines of the poem in which the protagonist’s state of unbeing is described as feeling

... like the world

Before your eyes ever opened.

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Stage Two of the Alchemical Synthesis

The Leukosis

Putrefaction extends and continues even unto whiteness¹.

The processes of ‘Mortification’ and ‘Putrefaction’ are accomplished, by the practical Alchemist, in a hermetically sealed flask called a ‘Bottle of Hermes’ or a ‘Philosophers’ Egg’. This flask is symbolically womb-shaped or heart-shaped, and it is heated in an oven called the ‘Athanor’ which, as Burckhardt notes, as far as the ‘Great Work’ was concerned – was none other than the human body, and thus also a simplified image of the cosmos².

During this careful heating, a flux occurs and, in the hermetic flask, “One can watch the vapour rising up the neck of the flask and condensing down the sides” until the “dry blackness” of the nigredo supervenes³.

Peacock TailThe second stage of the alchemical synthesis, known as the Leukosis, now begins. Further careful heating of the black mixture causes rapidly changing colours to appear in the flask, a state descriptively known as ‘The Peacock’s Tail’. Next, the colours subside and the flask may look as if it is entirely covered with gold, but this fades and eventually a state of perfect, dazzling whiteness “like ... glittering marble”⁴ obtains. This state, the Albedo, marks the end of the Leukosis.

Symbolically, the progressive purification and mixing of elements within an enclosed vessel represents the union of male and female principles within the cosmic womb from which the pure Spirit will be born. The metaphors used by Alchemists for this stage,

therefore, frequently describe the return of the physical and spiritual elements of the body to Mother Earth for re-creation.

The Leukosis, in *Cave Birds*, covers the poems from 'The accused', to 'A flayed crow in the hall of judgement'. The protagonist's body and soul are stripped of every last vestige of his earlier state, he acknowledges and relinquishes his masks and illusions, and reaches, at last, a state of ultimate nakedness and humility. Committing his body to the earth, he comes to the gate of the Underworld where he awaits release from his dark, hermetic egg in order to begin the next stage of his journey.

As well as using metaphors of death and rebirth, Alchemists describe the union of opposites and the re-creation of primal spiritual matter in terms of conjugation, insemination, fertilisation, gestation and birth. Arnold de Villa Nova's commentary is typical:

... when the blackness appears then the marriage or the matrimonie is made betwixt the male and the female, and then begotten is the spirit which is the dilator of the [path (?)] of the soule through the body⁵.

Despite these earthly analogies, the first alchemical stages represent a human being's initial steps along the spiritual path. Symbolically, they tell of an inner journey in which the soul is examined and purged of its profane and temporal attachments – a journey which is frequently likened to a descent into the Underworld⁶. The motive force and the guide for this spiritual journey is the divine spirit within the human creature, which the Alchemists identify with Mercury. So, having begun the process of transmutation, Mercury now appears in alchemical texts as the "metallic volatile himidity [sic] which is Mercury the wise"⁷, the guide who will accompany the pilgrim on this difficult path. This stage in *Cave Birds* is marked by the re-appearance of the accused as the "bedaubed, begauded / Eagle-dancer"(CB.24), whose mercurial temperament and 'Peacock's Tail' colours make his embodiment of Mercury apparent even if the protagonist's inner 'wisdom' has yet to be heeded.

Mercury dominates the Leukosis. Its silver-white, lunar light is initially tempered by the quicksilver volatility and colours of the 'Peacock's Tail'. Ultimately, however, it becomes 'fixed' in the dry, white bones of the skeleton, which is all that remains of the physical body when the profane and temporal elements have been relinquished.

Just as the Mercurial spirit enjoys only a brief period of freedom before an intensification of heat dries, coagulates and then sublimates it to a "supreme grade of whiteness"⁸, so the *Cave Birds* cockerel protagonist soon submits himself to the sun's annealing fires. A transformation from cockerel to crow begins⁹ and, in 'The knight', we see the slow disintegration of the bird's body until only the white bones of the 'Death Stone Bird'(ED) remain.

Alchemists, at this stage, talk of "bones on the distilled and whitened field"¹⁰; and in alchemical manuscripts it is 'Our Stone', 'crystalline snow', 'white tincture', 'elixir', 'virgin's milk' or a 'White Queen'. The form of the matter varies from one text to another

but Canon 95 of Benedictus Figulus expresses a common consensus:

Matter when brought to Whiteness, refuses to be corrupted or destroyed¹¹.

Thus, whiteness can be seen to indicate the presence of a substance which has “acquired sufficient strength to resist the ardours of fire”¹²; a substance which can be tempered by the literal, spiritual and metaphorical fires to which it must still be subjected before the true alchemical ‘Gold’ can be revealed. The exposed white bones of the Cave Birds knight suggest that Hughes’ protagonist has reached this stage.

‘The accused’

‘Socrates’ Cock’(ED)

‘A Tumbled Socratic Cock’¹³.

The physical life of the cockerel is offered up to the Creator, the Sun-being, who, in respect of Judgement, is a Raven.

Having been confronted so forcefully with evidence of his guilt and having been offered a form of atonement by the vulture, the protagonist’s view of himself begins to change. He has reached the stage which was designated by Blake as ‘Jehovah’, the sixth eye of God, the perception of evil. Blake’s Job at this stage recognises his sins with horror, and his body is shown as if on a stone altar surrounded by flames as his “wrought image” (Plate 11) is consumed. Hughes’ protagonist, too, acknowledges and confesses his sins, heaping them up to be consumed “on a flame–horned mountain–stone” in the furnace of the sun.

Job Plate 11

Each part of the cockerel’s “muddled body” has some “blood aberration” from which it must be cleansed. His brain is “the sacred assassin” which has sought to destroy the elements of enlightenment within him by rational argument (he is, after all, a ‘Socratic cock’¹⁴). “The gripful of daggers”, which is his body, has physically driven him to compromise his own integrity and satisfy his desires at the expense of others. His skin and plumage, like that of the “bedaubed, begauded / Eagle–dancer” who impersonates the supernatural Eagle in Pueblo Indian rituals, has bolstered his delusions of grandeur and allowed him to strut and crow in a decaying world – to be “lord of middens”.

The appetites of his body, he confesses, have ruled him: his heart, stuffed with selfhood instead of love; his stomach demanding that he play god with living things to feed it; and “his hard life–lust”, the phallic “Swan of insemination”, driving him to “the blind” satisfaction of his needs.

In alchemy, the swan is “the white elixir, the arsenic of the philosophers. It spews a milky fluid into the pure silver sea”. This milky fluid in the “mercurial fluid”, poisonous and destructive, but an essential part of the alchemical process^{14a}. Mention of the swan of insemination, however, also, brings to mind the mythological story of Zeus and Leda, and each confession that the protagonist makes suggests the god–like powers – all of them destructive – which he has arrogated to himself. He has been “The soul-stuffed despot”, “The corpse–eating god” and “the sacred assassin”.

His confession completed, the protagonist commits his body (which is also the symbol of his pride) to the cleansing fires of the gods he has so profanely imitated. He becomes 'Socrates' cock' of Hughes' alternative title, the traditional sacrifice which the dying Socrates acknowledged that he owed to Aeschulapius, the son of Apollo and god of healing, medicine and resurrection of the dead¹⁵. Thus, Hughes' protagonist makes of himself a sacrificial offering to ensure his own re-birth in the afterlife: and, at the same time, the impurities of "His muddled body" are burned away to leave the natural "ore" from which the spiritual gold will be made.

In Baskin's drawing the cockerel is tumbled but still crowing. His gaudy tail curls towards his body like the tongues of flame to which he will soon consign himself.

The destruction of the corporeal body in the sun's purifying flames will reveal the true colours of the protagonist: beneath the profane mask is the rainbowed essence of his soul. Suggesting this, Hughes ends his poem with biblical images of hope and blessing – the rainbow and a beatitude.

'First, the doubtful charts of skin'

So Sentenced, and swallowed by the Raven, the protagonist (hero) finds himself on a journey which leads him not to death (to extinction), but to the start of a new adventure.

In this poem, the rituals of a shamanic journey are strongly present in the inner journey which the protagonist makes and which Hughes presents as a literal excursion through the physical body. Beginning with an awareness of his skin against the hard rocks, the protagonist moves on to an awareness of limbs, intestines and veins, his skull and, finally, his bones.

This progressively deeper exploration of the body is a process which Eliade describes as essential in Shamanic rites; a process known as "contemplating one's own skeleton"¹⁶. To describe it Eliade quotes the explorer, Rasmussen, who had "interrogated" many Eskimo shamans:

Though no shaman can explain to himself how or why, he can, ... as it were by thought alone, divest his body of its flesh and blood, so that nothing remains but his bones. And he must then name all the parts of his body, mentioning every single bone by name; and in so doing, he must not use ordinary human speech, but only the special and sacred shaman's language which he has learned from his instructor ¹⁷.

Eliade further comments that "reduction to the skeleton indicates a passing beyond the profane human condition and, hence, a deliverance from it": that, for example, to hunters and herdsman

bone represents the very source of life.... To reduce oneself to the skeleton condition is equivalent to re-entering the womb of this primordial life, that is, to a complete renewal, a mystical rebirth¹⁸.

Hughes' protagonist does not name every bone in his body but he does name each part

of his body in Hughes' own shaman/poet's tongue until he comes "to loose bones". Hughes' 'sacred shaman's language' is his poetic voice and, as an integral part of his language, he uses mythology to enlarge the imaginative scope of his words.

In this poem, Hughes draws on events and situations which are common to the many mythological hero-stories which he believed recount shamanic journeys¹⁹. In particular, the story of Odysseus is evoked.

Like Odysseus, the protagonist's predicament has been caused by the anger of the gods. He, too, has been in the power of the goddess, Athena/Diana, who has acted as both protector and tormentor. In the *Odyssey*, it is Athena who sends the messenger Hermes/Mercury to arrange Odysseus' freedom and homecoming, yet she allows delays in his journey which cause him much suffering. In *Cave Birds*, the female principle in Nature (the Goddess/Diana) is responsible for the protagonist's summons, trial and sentence, but she is also his protector.

Like Odysseus (and like most of humanity) the protagonist's early journeying through life has contained "irrelevant marvels" and "much boredom". Now, however, powerful god-like forces have caused him to be wrecked: he has, as it were, been stripped of his pretensions and brought (in colloquial terms) 'down to earth' – an earth which he experiences directly as sharp and rocky.

The "wet cave" of the intestines which gives Hughes' protagonist "pause" finds parallels in the several caves in which Odysseus was detained before his homecoming: the cave of the Cyclops, Polyphemos, was one temporary prison; that of the nymph, Kalypso, another.

Hughes' image of the protagonist "hung" in a "web of veins", however, has no parallel in the *Odyssey*: it recalls, instead, the spiders web imagery of 'The judge'. It suggests, also, that Hughes had in mind Baskin's woodcut of 'The Hanged Man' which he considers to be central to the meaning of Baskin's artistic endeavours, and of which he has written in at least two commentaries on Baskin's art²⁰. Baskin's woodcut delineates the hanged man's body by the web of veins and nerves within it so that the figure seems literally to hang in this network which both supports life and limits it. The suggestion is of the paradox of the physical constraints on human potential: the biological reality which defines the human condition; the combination of beauty and horror which is Man. Hughes' commentary on this figure describes it as symbolising one pole of the regenerative theme which underlies all Baskin's art (as it does his own); he sees it as depicting "the archetype victim of the Mother Earth Goddess ... as a Death Goddess"²¹; and he writes of it:

... this figure insists it is a Prometheus, a Job. And if it could speak, or more likely sing, we would hear the full balanced chord of epic²².

It is, in other words, another form of the epic hero who makes the shamanic journey, and it is understandable that it should have been in his mind as he worked on *Cave Birds*.

Having suffered the initiatory torments of the hanged man/ Prometheus/Job, Hughes' protagonist moves on. Like Odysseus, he visits "the islands of women" (there seems to be no bodily analogy for this); and the land of the dead which, for him, is represented by his skull – a hill-shaped bone container for his visions and his mental battles. Finally, he comes to his skeleton – "loose bones / On a heathery moor".

The similarities which exist between Homer's *Odyssey* and Hughes' poem, however, are mostly the result of a common theme, and there are important differences. Whilst Odysseus journeys in the geographical environment of the Mediterranean, for example, the Cave Birds hero exists in a Celtic world. The earth on which his bones come to rest is part of a Northern, Celtic landscape of windy moors, heather, decaying churches and ancient standing stones. It is a landscape very like that of Hughes' own Yorkshire background – the landscape which Fay Godwin's photographs capture in *Remains of Elmet*.

In the imagery of the poem, especially from line 11 onwards, there are strong echoes of Norse and Celtic epics, myths and legends. The "skull-hill of visions" hints at gruesome Viking practices and also, perhaps, recalls the prophetic skull of the Celtic god, Bran, which was buried in the White Hill of Britain²³. The "battle in the valley of screams", too, suggests the perilous valley where the chapel of doom is found in the *Grail Legends*²⁴ and, as if to reinforce this, there is an echo of the "empty chapel", the "tumbled grave" and the "dry bones" of the bleak landscape of Eliot's *The Waste Land*²⁵.

Eliot's landscape is one in which decay, desolation, horror and death prevail. But in Hughes' vivid picture, the wild horses standing among the graves bring a breath of life and energy to temper the bleakness. And the leaning menhir, on which the protagonist finds his name and epitaph, adds a magical significance to the stone and bone which are all that will soon remain of the former man. Here, having completed the examination of his own skeleton, the protagonist is ready to return his body to the earth.

Sketched into the dark background of the Baskin etching for which this poem was written is a figure which seems to combine the sun and the moon. It is as if these celestial bodies have been re-united and returned to earth's *primaeva* darkness, just as the elements of Mercury and Sulphur are continually purified in an alchemical synthesis and returned to the solution²⁶. The bird itself, the protagonist, is entering that same darkness. Its head and neck are already skeletal but its body, which is still in the light, is still feathered. Around the bird's skull is a wreath of evergreen laurel, a symbol of immortality and fecundity, sacred to Diana and to Apollo²⁷.

'The knight'

'Death Stone Bird '(ED)

'A Death Stone Crow of Carrion'(SP)²⁸

'The Stone of Death'(SP)

There is no longer anything of a cockerel about him. Possession by Raven has transformed him to something crow-like, for the new trials in the underworld.

As a knight, a warrior, he dedicates himself to whatever shall be required of him in this afterlife.

The various titles of this poem continue the imagery of the previous episode in the drama. Now, the stone and bone which are the essential elements of the protagonist are seen as elements of the Grail knight whose quest embodies the paradoxes of the mystical journey. To conquer he must surrender everything, physical and mental, and his victory will be his own defeat. In order to be re-born he first must die, submitting himself totally to the supreme universal powers and relinquishing all selfhood and striving. With infinite patience and infinite acceptance he must enter what Eliot described as “the world of perpetual solitude” which entails

Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit: 29.

He must enter the grave, returning himself to Nature, which was his mother, so that he may be re-created.

The knight’s “sacrifice is perfect”. The “spoils” which he has gained from Nature he returns. On the altar of earth he exposes his body to the elements; and the insects, like Nature’s priests, “officiate” at the ritual dismemberment.

All around the knight there is movement as Nature partakes of the sacrifice, squabbling over his body, tugging, drinking and unravelling it. In contrast, the slow, measured lines which describe his kneeling, his offering, his “perfect” sacrifice, his “flawless” submission and his “vast” patience, impart a religious solemnity to the poem.

The knight’s Earthly religion, too, “crumbles” and disintegrates. His ragged banner, the standard which proclaims his allegiance, is his own disintegrating body; and in the chapel of his skull, where the sacred texts of his self-worship have been learned, stored and glorified, his dead eyes set to a bold stare. With a characteristic intertwining of metaphoric and literal meaning, Hughes combines the imagery of chivalric self-sacrifice with a realistic description of the slow physical processes of death and dissolution.

Baskin’s drawing shows the bird – the knight – as completely skeletal. The “Blades” of his wing bones, the “shafts” of his leg-bones and the “unstrung bows” of his ribs are “Wrapped in the rags of his banner”. He is now totally immersed in darkness. In an early version of Hughes’ poem this same darkness was present when (using the personal pronoun) he wrote:

Now I learn everything, I become everything

But alone, in emptiness of stone, temple of sandgrains, ruined and abandoned

An evolving twilight, a total sea of stars ... (ED).

The published version, however, ends with the knight’s bones hardening and whitening in the glare of sunlight. Hughes’ final image captures, with beautiful precision, the sun’s strength, its persistence through time and its powers of “revelation”. The final couplet

suggests not only that the white bones (the alchemical symbol of the albedo) will be fully revealed, but also that some further, more metaphysical disclosure is to come. So, “hour by hour”, the expectancy grows.

‘Something was happening’

Whilst the (protagonist) hero undergoes his vigil, a helper begins to work for him, calling on the Eagles.

This poem appears in the ‘A’ sequence and also in the Faber publication. It was read at the Ilkley Festival and it was included in the BBC broadcast. Despite this, it was one of the last poems to be added to the sequence and, as Sagar comments, most of these later poems seem to be “quite outside the bird-drama”³⁰.

The one of Hughes’ projections of the Cave Birds story into the ‘human world’. Positioned as it is, however, directly after the scene of the hero’s complete submission to Nature, it does not fit into the established pattern of events. It depicts a still unresolved alienation between the human male and female of Hughes’ “parallel story”³¹: and this reversion to a state of affairs which existed earlier in the sequence but which has, on the bird-drama level, just been resolved, is confusing. So, too, is the fact that now it is the female who is sacrificed, thus reversing the situation described in ‘The knight’ where the female element – Earth – endures. Yet, this death reinforces the earlier theme of the unity of male and female elements within the human creature, and it depicts, in contrasting tone, the ‘female’ death which must inevitably accompany the male hero’s sacrifice.

In this poem the “anaesthetised”³², unfeeling state of the human male is again apparent. It is demonstrated in the contrast between the man’s trivial actions and the horrifying death of the woman: he saunters and munches whilst she suffers and burns. Because the man and the woman and their contrasting situations are linked so closely in the poem, the man’s heartless complacency seems unforgivable. There is, however, a suggestion of helplessness in his thoughts: when, “in April”, the green hints of Nature’s revival appear, he is dismayed. He seems to foresee the repetition of a cycle of events which he cannot control and which, like the annual cycle of Nature, entails death. Whilst his own world of inanimate objects “Registered nothing”, the world of Nature, “The earth”, rejects him totally.

The man’s helplessness and his feelings of guilty involvement in the woman’s death emerge more strongly in earlier versions of the poem. In one, he thinks “about Hamlet/looking at Ophelia’s corpse”, as if he feels himself to be similarly constrained by circumstances to deny his feelings, thereby causing the woman’s death. In another, everything around him seems to reflect “the laughter of the gods”(ED).

In this human male/human female story, the relevance of the final image in the poem is unclear. The “eagle–hunter” would seem, from Hughes’ introductory note, to be the man’s helper. Possibly he is intended to be a guide like those which accompany a shaman through the underworld, but this does not emerge from the poem. Whoever he

is, his song apparently exerts power over the eagle–gods which torment the protagonist. He sings, however, “Two, three, four thousand years off key”, a time span which may represent the period of human existence on earth; or the lapse of time since Nature dominated all religion and, thus, the length of time during which man and woman have become alienated from the natural energies.

Baskin’s drawing for this poem offers no further illumination of its puzzles. His soaring eagle, with its huge and vicious claws, seems poised to stoop on its prey.

Blake Fall of Man

‘The gatekeeper’

‘A Sphynx. A Two Headed One’ / ‘Death’s Doorkeeper’ (ED)

‘The Signpost Eagle’ (ED)

‘A Double Osprey’ (SP)

‘A Fierce Osprey’ (SP)

‘Death’s Doorway Guard’ (SP)

The eagles have agreed to weight [sic] him in their balance (A)

In almost all mythologies, at the interface between life and death, heaven and hell, there stands an enigmatic creature which represents a union of opposites. Invariably this creature sets the journeyer some test which must be passed before further progress can be made.

The gatekeeper of Hughes’ Cave Birds drama is another such creature. It is a “sphinx”, a double creature combining human and animal, and female and male features. It is “two–headed” like the door god, Janus, who is etymologically identified with Diana, the Great Goddess³³. This linking of a god and goddess of light is suggested, also, in Baskin’s bird, whose shadowy head and mixture of feathers appear to combine both the eagle and the owl – the birds of Janus and Diana, respectively. Such a suggested combination of features is more apparent if the picture is compared with that accompanying ‘A green mother’ later in the poem sequence.

The variety of titles for this poem reflect the several very different versions of the poem which exist. One early draft deals solely with the nature of “Death’s Doorkeeper” who combines “the two in one ... The death of darkness and the death of brightness”, “the left hand and the right hand”, “unbeing” and “ever being”. In every version, however, the protagonist is presented with a choice which “is no choice” (ED); a paradoxical situation in which his fate has already been determined by his own nature. This is the traditional, initiatory “paradoxical passage” to heaven which Eliade describes. It is a passage which can only be negotiated successfully by one who has already been well prepared and who “has transcended the human condition”: “by one who is spirit” ³⁴.

The Cave Birds hero is now to be judged, weighed in the balance like the Egyptian dead, to see if his soul is pure enough to enter the world of the gods. It is a terrifying experience, and the published versions of this poem concentrate on the protagonist’s reactions – his “sweatings and grinnings”, his “fear” and his “Remorse”. In describing

the protagonist, Hughes again chooses images of terror which are also those of death and decomposition, thus reiterating the analogy between spiritual trials and physical death which he has made in the previous poems. Such reiteration parallels the repetitions of the alchemical process but, in addition, the blunt and ugly words (“sweating”, “oozes”, “Blurting”, “orifice”) and the grossness of the imagery in this poem create a mood of ugliness and terror which contrasts sharply with the calm, the solemnity and the beauty that Hughes created in ‘The knight’. Through such repetition and contrast Hughes emphasises the physical/spiritual duality of human beings.

One draft version of the poem, which concentrated on the protagonist’s dilemma, was less realistically evocative and more consistent with the solemnity of mood Hughes had established in ‘The knight’. In it, Hughes made an interesting identification between the protagonist and the eagle. It reads, in part:

And the terror is the revelation
Of yourself for what you are: too late, too late, too late.

The terror: too late (to) remake its path
And promises are futile.

Your history
Here your own history, like an eagle,
Picks up you body’s[? Illegible]

Picks you up (ED).
Here, there is no doubt about the protagonist’s responsibility for his own situation and his own fate. The published version, however, whilst conveying the protagonist’s feelings more dramatically, suggests that he is still the pawn of eagle–gods who can “drop you into a bog or carry you to eagles”.

The marked differences between the several versions of this poem demonstrate Hughes’ efforts to present his complex theme on two levels, one of which embodies common (but extremely esoteric) spiritual beliefs, whilst the other sets out to tell a comparatively simple story. In ‘The gatekeeper’, as published in the Faber edition, the poem succeeds on the story–telling level but it creates some problems of consistency in the spiritual order of events. In contrast, Hughes’ next poem combines both levels with grace and beauty.

‘A flayed crow in the hall of judgement’
‘Waiting for the 1st Judgement’(ED)
‘A (Jonah) Flayed Crow: The Hall of Judgement’(SP)
‘Awaiting Judgement in the Afterlife’(SP)
They allow him a new chance in their world

In this poem, for the first time in the Cave Birds sequence, the alchemical imagery predominates. The protagonist describes himself in terms of matter which is being

continuously distilled and condensed: he floats “As mist–balls float, and as stars”; and he is condensed into “A globe of blot, a drop of unbeing”, “a distillation in which [he] no longer finds anything recognisable”(ED). His body has dissolved and, from this primordial mixture of elements. he is being re–created. The pun in Hughes’ phrase – “This yoke of afterlife” – suggests the generative, yolk–like nature of the mixture within which the protagonist exists like “the self of some spore”. Yet, his choice of ‘yoke’, rather than ‘yolk’, defines well the involuntary participation of the protagonist in the process: it prompts. too, the idea of a burden, the awesome and paradoxical nature of which is embodied in the protagonist’s description of the great weight which rests on him “as a feather on a hand”. Rising, falling and floating, like an embryo inside an egg, like a foetus in a womb³⁵, he waits for his future with total acceptance, only wondering what this future will be:

What feathers shall I have? What is my weakness for?

His questions are Wodwo–like but his humility is perfect. Soul–naked, he offers the very skin of his soul as “A mat” for his judges.

Baskin’s drawing shows the embryo crow within “this white of death blackness” which is the egg. His feathers are undefined and he is bowed beneath the frail but tough white of the egg–shell which protects and restrains him, resting on him just as “A great fear” rests feather–like on Hughes’ protagonist: it contains and delineates his world as Baskin’s line does in this picture.

In Hughes’ poem, the re–creation of the protagonist is presented as an alchemical process and no mention is made of any controlling creative force. The suggestion of some infinitely terrifying but infinitely gentle power, however, is contained in Hughes’ simile:

A great fear rests

On the thing I am, as a feather on a hand.

Such a paradoxical situation finds an interesting parallel in Blake’s illustrations for the story of Job (Plate 14) which, like Hughes’ poem, deals with a re–creation or genesis. Blake pictures Job, his wife and his friends, enclosed in an egg–shaped cavern on which God, the supreme being of infinite wrath and love, kneels. God is the creator. In cloud–shells beneath His outstretched arms are His creations of light, Apollo and Diana³⁶, the sun and the moon. Surrounding the picture are egg–shaped miniatures depicting texts from Genesis. This whole plate illustrates, as does Baskin’s drawing and Hughes’ poem, the hero’s spiritual re–creation and the beginning of the period of gestation which precedes re–birth. It is a fine example, too, of the similarity of ideas and imagery used by all three artists in their treatment of this theme of spiritual enlightenment.

Job Plate 14

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Stage Three of the Alchemical Synthesis
Solution and Distillation: Sulphur

The alchemical procedures undertaken so far have achieved the reunification of prima materia with the element Earth. In order to recreate the perfect unity of matter the mixture must now be washed with cleansing and revivifying Water, then Fire and Air must be added.

Water is essential at this stage for, as Ripley explained:

Without thine earth with water revived be
Our true congelation shalt thou never see¹.
After the stages of death and dissolution. it is water which 'thing is mortified causeth to revive'².

Using a specially shaped retort called a 'Pelican', the Alchemist now adds 'Our Water' (which may have been any one of a number of different solvents) to the dry mixture and commences a slow process of circulation, distillation and sublimation³.

The Pelican retort has metaphorical, as well as practical, significance, being known to Alchemists as a vessel of transformation. It was named for its shape, which resembles that of a pelican pecking its breast, and the significance of this supposed resemblance is as described by Jung in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*:

... it is said that the pelican so loves her young that she puts them to death with her claws. But on the third day for grief, she wounds herself, and letting the blood from her body drip upon the fledglings she raises them from the dead. The pelican signifies the Lord who so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son whom on the third day he raised up, victor over death, and exalted above every name (MC.13f).

The washing procedures which take place in the pelican retort are regarded, therefore, as bringing about the physical and spiritual resurrection and purification of the subject matter. In the metaphors by which the Alchemists describe their work, 'Our Water' is 'divine rain'⁴ or 'celestial dew'⁵ which moistens the mixture and causes germination and growth. It is also written of as 'baptismal water' which washes away the last profane impurities from the nascent soul (MC.III:5).

Pelican

In terms of the essential involvement of Mercury and Sulphur throughout the alchemical synthesis, the washing procedure which takes place in the pelican retort demonstrates the healing side of Mercury's dual nature (MC.13), and the substance which is healed

and revived is Sulphur. So, whilst the earlier stage of Leukosis (Stage II) dealt with the perfection of Mercury or the 'White Female', the whole of this third stage of the transformation deals with the perfection of Sulphur, the 'red stone' or the 'Red Male'⁶.

Thei seide with-in centris of incomplete white
Was oure red stone of most delight;
Which may be with strength & kind of fyre
Made to apere right as we desire.

...

That is to say, if you take hede thereto,
Then is the faire white woman
Mariede to the rodie mane;⁷

In *Cave Birds*, 'The baptist' parallels the initial washing operations of the third alchemical stage, and one of Hughes' alternative titles for the poem is 'A Pelican'(ED). The protagonist, at this stage, is recreated, but not yet re-born. In common with descriptions of the mixture found in alchemical allegories, his situation is likened to that of an embryo being nourished within its shell or a foetus within the womb⁸.

Hughes' protagonist now undergoes a period of trials and tests, just as the alchemical mixture is now subjected to repeated purifying sublimation within the flask to prepare it for the final stage of the whole process. As a soul newly released from physical constraints, the protagonist's final form is yet to be fixed and, like the soul wandering in the Bardo state of Buddhist belief, he meets a number of manifestations which offer him different kinds of rebirth into different 'heavens'.

The imagery of the poems from 'The baptist' to 'After there was nothing' moves between Heaven and Earth, but it is predominantly Earthbound. In this respect it parallels the sequence of events which occurs in repeated sublimation, where solids separate from the body of the mixture rise upwards and are precipitated on the walls of the flask before falling back into the mixture. The Alchemists frequently describe this repeated process of 'solve et coagula' in terms of the spirit ascending and falling back, being digested, and having its poisons "spued out"⁹.

Conjunction and Separation

Hughes' notes to the two poems which were published in the Faber edition as 'A riddle' and 'The scapegoat' describe a similar purifying digestion: the 'Monkey-Eating Eagle' 'marries' its own substance to that of the protagonist, thus creating a confusion of identities ("Just as you are my father / I am your bride" ('A riddle' (CB.44)). From this, the cockerel scapegoat is 'driven out'(ED).

The protagonist's lack of singularity is expressed again in Hughes' notes for 'After there was nothing', and 'His legs ran about':

'After there was nothing'

At moments it seems as if he were increasingly human, but somehow as if unborn, as if

he were in the womb of some woman who is herself of dubious reality.

'His legs ran about'

... he is no longer entirely unborn, though not completely born either, with consequent contusions (ED).

This uncertainty and confusion is easily explained in an alchemical context because the process of repeated sublimation involves a mingling of the properties and characteristics of the substances involved. Alchemical metaphor describes the process as being undertaken in order 'to make the body spiritual', and the soul 'corporeal' and 'co-substantial' with the body: it entails cleansing of the body and the combination of the opposing principles – body/soul, male/female, Mercury/Sulphur:

And Sublimations we make for causes three,
The first cause is, to make the bodie spiritual
The second is, that the spirit may corporeall bee,
And become fixt with it, and cosubstantiall;
The third cause is, that from his filthie originall
He may be cleansed, and his saltnes sulphuriousv
May be minimised in him, which is infectious¹⁰.

Alchemically, the Sulphur which predominates in Stage III of the process is earthy, non combustible and fixed (as opposed to volatile). It is described in the texts as being oily, coagulating and red¹¹, and it is called 'red-earth', the 'red-male' and "the great dragon blaze, the secret fire"¹². Like Mercury, it is an essential part of 'Adamic' earth, the 'Prime Matter' of Mankind, and it is associated with Earthly passions¹³. Although it is symbolised by the Sun, it has a lunar form in which it a white woman, or a white dove, and is associated with fertility and birth (MC.130–131; 69). Mercury is "the male seed from which all metals are created" and the fire of Sulphur "is the woman that brings forth fruit"¹⁴. Appropriately, the Cave Birds poems which represent this stage are full of images of plants, animals and earthy fecundity, and they could be described as dealing, mostly, with Earth-bound desires and pleasures. In particular, the poem 'A green mother' exemplifies this earthy, sulphurous stage: an early version of the poem contains references to "a sulphur glare" and describes the protagonist as a "molten dove", a "trophy" which is lifted "slow and charred from the furnace, in red-oiled strength". Such specifically alchemical imagery does not survive in the final, published version of the poem, but the earthy, blissful and ecstatic mood does, and this is carried on into the next poem in the sequence – 'As I came, I saw a wood'.

The more specifically sexual associations of Sulphur are suitably symbolised in the sequence by the lust-driven "stud cockerel"(ED) of 'The scapegoat' and in the woman of 'After there was nothing ...', who exists for, and is obsessed by, her reproductive functions. These two poems present the essential Adam and Eve who, in alchemical texts, are often called the 'Red Male' and the 'White Woman' or 'solar' and 'lunar' Sulphur(MC.131; 230; Ch.V), and which represent opposites which must be reconciled before physical and spiritual reintegration of the raw material can be achieved¹⁵.

The end of Stage III of the alchemical transmutation is indicated by the appearance,

once again, of a dazzling whiteness which indicates the end of the 'Sublimation'. As Ripley puts it in his *Compound of Alchemy* (1591), where he describes Sublimation as the eighth of twelve 'Gates' to completion of the process :

Then when they thus together depured be
They will sublime up whiter than the snowe;
That light will greatly comfort thee:
For then, anon, perfectly thou shalt knowe
The Spirits shall so adowne ythrow,
That this eight Gate shall be to thee unlocked
Out of which many be shut and mocked,¹⁶

Similar snow and light imagery appears in Hughes' poem, 'The guide', which marks the end of the protagonist's spiritual testing and the end of the third alchemical stage in the Cave Birds sequence.

The hero's passage through the underworld has been completed. Now, a guide comes to help him on the next stage of his journey, lifting him from the snowy whiteness and flying with him into a fiery wind. That this guide is another manifestation of Mercury/Hermes is suggested by the alchemical writing of Bonus of Ferrara, who describes Mercury, at this stage, as "a pure, heavenly and glorious water" which "is sometimes referred to as a flying bird". This bird is depicted in Ripley's illustrated alchemical scroll, where he writes:

The Bird of Hermes is my name,
Eating my wings to make me tame.

In the Sea withouten lesse,
Standeth the Bird of Hermes:
Eating his Wings variable,
And thereby maketh himself more stable;
When all his Fethers be agon,
He standeth still there as a stone;
Here is now both White and Red,
And also the Stone to quicken the dead,¹⁷

Bonus writes, also, of the vulnerability of the newly made alchemical substance, likening it to newly hatched "little creatures" which need the assistance and guidance of some more powerful being¹⁸: for the Alchemist, Mercury in its healing form is always this assistant or guide.

Bird of Hermes
'The baptist'
'The Maze Pelican' (ED)
'A Pelican' (ED)
'The False Guide to Unending Mazes' ¹⁹
'The Pontiff' (EU) ²⁰
'A Hermetic Pelican' (EU)

But first he has to be washed in the waters of the source.

Water is universally associated in mythology with birth and with initiation, both of which entail the crossing of thresholds. It represents the remnants of the chaotic waters of primordial creation which became the salt-sea of the Earth; it is a symbol for the amniotic waters of birth and the purifying waters of spiritual initiation; and it is “the vehicle of the goddess”²¹, who is the Mother.

Using images and words which evoke the cool, soothing and nurturing properties of water, Hughes brings his protagonist to the threshold of rebirth. This baptism, however, is more than a ritual washing-away of the old self or a cleansing of the sinner, as in a Christian baptism. By the use of words such as “enfolds” and “balm”, and by the long, soothing vowel-sounds of each line, Hughes suggests the gentle healing process in which his protagonist is a helpless participant. Bandaged, blindfold and gagged, like an Egyptian mummy, the hero undergoes a slow dissolution in which the “body’s puckering hurts” and the soul’s “hard-cornered grief” slowly melt to a fluid state such as is paralleled in Nature by the cellular chaos which precedes metamorphosis.

The helplessness of the protagonist and his enclosure within the “winding waters” of the baptismal sea suggest his surrender to a state of consciousness such as Jung describes when he refers to baptism as immersion in the seas of the collective subconscious (MC.199). For Jung, it is the “sinful and impure” personal subconscious which is washed away by the baptismal waters: the remaining collective subconscious contains the “constructive and destructive powers of the unconscious” (MC.201) which are shared by all human beings. Jung believes that the collective subconscious is expressed

in the mythological teachings, characteristic of most mystery religions, which reveal the secret knowledge concerning the origin of all things and the way to salvation. (MC. 190-200)

Discussing the Christian and the Alchemical views of baptism, Jung concludes that both doctrines see it as a ritual in which those who are adequately purified, prepared and guided, cross a spiritual threshold (MC.199–200; 235–239). The Cave Birds protagonist has been brought to a condition in which he now fulfils these requirements, but beyond this point are still further tests and puzzles.

Despite the baptist’s soothing and healing powers, the bird-being which appears in Cave Birds at this point is not, as Baskin suggests in the title to his picture, completely trustworthy. Baskin’s pelican is a curious bird. Its beak appears to be stuck together with tar, its serpentine neck is filled with bandage-like strips, and its feet are those of a raptor not an aquatic bird. It is a confusing mixture which indicates the confusing nature of a bird whose false guidance leads to “unending mazes”: mazes which are, perhaps, the mazes of the subconscious mind. Certainly, true guidance and true wholeness have yet to be achieved.

A completely different poem exists among the papers at Emory University. Its title ‘The

pontiff' suggests that the guide assumes airs of infallibility and it confirms the suggestion that this guide is not to be trusted. The poem is structured in two columns the first of which proclaims that this pelican offers "revelation", "renewal", "strength" and beauty. It claims to be able to bring the protagonist hope and joy, and to be able to show him the "road to life". The second column is full of images of the after-death dissolution of the body, the "spoor of phosphorescence", the stripped bone where the "fly of enquiry" hovers and the worm "blooms".

The first column instructs the protagonist not to turn right and ends with the word 'Yes'; the second tells him not to turn left, and ends with 'No'. This 'pontiff' promises, in the first column, to bring him to the world, but in the second column warns him that he will have his "head twisted backwards", as if still looking at his past rather than striving towards his future. This is a 'maze' the protagonist must negotiate – the first of a number of tests which must still be passed. And it reflects the alchemical process in which there are still repeated purifications to be undergone before the pure 'gold' can be achieved.

'Only a little sleep, a little slumber '

Reduced to total dependency on the mercy (help) of (the) eagles, he begins to feel first stirrings. (of humanity again).

This poem was one which was added to the sequence at a late stage, and for which Baskin subsequently provided a drawing. It appears only in the A sequence, but it was read at the Ilkley Festival, and the version published in the Faber edition was included in the BBC broadcast.

In the broadcast, all but the last line of the poem were read chorally, the final statement being made by the hero's voice alone so that it was obvious that it was he to whom the earlier lines were addressed. Such an identification of the poem's voices is only suggested in the published versions of the poem by the enclosure of the final line in inverted commas. It was not indicated at all in earlier versions which, in any case, are very different, and in which a definite duality in the protagonist's nature is still apparent, the subject of the poem's action being alternately 'I' and 'you'. Despite this, it seems most likely that such duality is intended in the final version of the poem, since the ultimate aim of the whole cleansing and healing process is to achieve a balanced unity, not to destroy one aspect of the personality in favour of any other.

When read to oneself from the printed page, the poem has a meditative tone which suggests the protagonist's own tentative probing of this new aspect of himself, this new experience. Such tentativeness is in keeping, too, with the description of the new creature, its shyness and silence, and its relationship to the being from which it has emerged (it is part of his brain, and its "nest" is among his bones). It is the tiny spark of humanity which is all that is left of the former personality, and it is fragile and vulnerable, like the fledgling in Baskin's illustration.

In describing the separation of this being from the remnants of the old arrogant and

selfish one, Hughes' imagery captures, exactly, the ambiguous relationship between the two. What remains of the old is "a polyp", something which is either a malign growth to be "snipped off" and discarded, or a tiny aquatic animal from which whole colonies may grow. It is, also, "a crumb of fungus / A pulp of mouldy tinder", unpleasant sounding things which nevertheless have great generative power: fungus reproducing with ease, and tinder kindling fires which then consume it. Thus, in his imagery, Hughes captures the paradox of the phoenix, which is born from its parent's ashes and which, in Alchemy, is the symbol of the newly risen soul. And, in the final line of the poem – "I am the last of my kind" – he concisely conveys both the rarity of this 'bird' and its fledgling vulnerability.

'A green mother'

'A Loyal Mother' (ED)

'A Sunrise Owl' (SP)

'Kindly father of lies and forgiveness' 22

He is offered an easy option, by the eagle-owl.

At this stage in the Cave Birds sequence, Hughes' acknowledged debt to the Buddhist Bardo Thodol becomes most apparent. Having been separated from its material body, his new creature now wanders in a strange world like a soul wandering in the Bardo.

Just as the Bardo-wandering soul is offered re-birth of various kinds by manifested deities, so Hughes' fledgling is shown different 'heavens' from which he may choose. The purpose of the Bardo Thodol is to prepare the soul to recognise and to avoid re-birth into the lower planes of existence which are governed by Earthly passions and obsessions: the soul is taught to choose, instead, a liberated buddha state. Similarly, Hughes' protagonist must recognise that his struggles are not yet over, and that he must reject the easily achieved heavens of Earthly bliss and Paradisal ecstasy if he is to reach the heaven of the eagles.

Despite the fact that Hughes' introductions for this poem refer to an eagle-owl and Baskin's illustration title calls the bird a father of forgiveness, the bird-being which now appears is female, motherly and benign. She is, again, Blodeuwedd the flower goddess who is also an owl, and her "busy hive of heavens" is that of the Earth Goddess, Mother Earth, whose "grave is her breast" and whose "angels" are of the trees and flowers. She offers the almost total acceptance and care of a mother; a return to the security of childhood; a continual dreamlike existence of careless bliss. Yet, there is an underlying irony in this offer – an irony which is exemplified by the worm, "A forgiving God", which is more usually recognised as a corpse-gnawer. In the worm's heaven, certainly, "little of you will be rejected" but, as in other Earthly heavens, you will share the "everliving bliss" of the flowers, having "endless life" in the continuous recycling processes of Nature. This is just such a state, on the lower planes of existence, from which the Bardo Thodol seeks to provide release. It is a blind, vegetative state on the wheel of life from which there can be no progress and no hope of enlightenment.

Closely linked in the poem with these natural heavens are "the heavens of your

persuasion", the heavens of "The city of religions". This connection is important, for it indicates strongly Hughes' own views on the organised religions of the world. From the beginning, this poem parodies the kind of forgiveness, acceptance, comfort and promises of everlasting life which are fundamental to these religions, and to Christianity in particular. Like hotels in a "holiday city", Mankind's religions can offer comforting havens from the harsh realities of life and death, and rituals and dogma which obviate the need to think and decide for oneself. They, like the heavens offered in the poem, promise riches in the 'Kingdom of Heaven' which will be the "aftertaste of death".

The words and pattern of the second line of the poem provide the first hint of Hughes' parody, recalling the biblical quotation, "In my father's house are many mansions"²³. In the fifth and sixth stanzas, however, the connection is made more specific. By using the word 'candle' as an adjective linked to 'prayers' Hughes suggests the ethereal, illuminating quality of prayer, but he immediately destroys this spiritual felicity with the word 'congealed'. The "angel, a star" which could have soared with the prayers, congeals and falls, as if Earthbound by the formal rituals of rule-bound, rationally ordained, worldly prayer.

The Goddess, like the fatherly gods of the world's major religions, has a cruel, retributive side to her nature, but, although her association with death is made clear in the poem, only her motherly, loving aspect is revealed. Baskin's drawing shows her as an owl, a plump, benign looking, dark eyed bird of the night, whose raptorial claws are well hidden beneath her fluffed-out feathers. Her eagle nature is concealed, but other factors may also have modified this bird's appearance. Comparison of this drawing with the drawings for two earlier poems, 'The plaintiff' and (especially) 'The gatekeeper', shows the softening which has occurred in the eagle-owl's appearance as the protagonist has progressed on his journey. In the teachings of the Bardo Thodol, where the manifestations which appear to the wandering soul are its own projections, such a softening would reflect the protagonist's increasing acceptance of the female aspects of his nature and a merging of the dichotomies which characterised his world.

'As I came, I saw a wood'

Much as he would like to take this beautiful option, he cannot.

As with several of the poems which were added to the original Cave Birds sequence, this poem allows us to observe the current situation through the protagonist's eyes and to share his reactions. So, we see with him the kind of heavens which the green mother is offering.

Like many questing knights, the protagonist comes to a dark wood, unknown territory which is traditionally fraught with danger and the risk of enchantment. It is significant that what attracts his attention first is the trees. Unlike the mythical Tree of Life which connects the realms of the Underworld, the Middle World and Heaven, these trees merely clutch at the heavens and their starkness reminds the protagonist of "savages", unenlightened people "clutching at the sky". In his newly aware state (the phrase "I could see" is emphasised by repetition and by the isolation of the lines in which it

occurs) he sees the self absorption of the dancers and the superficial signs of their sanctity and obedience – the “glow” of their fur and their “holy steps”. He sees, also, the festive, ritual nature of the dancers’ religious ecstasy, and his own position of choice at the “crossroads of all the heavens”.

The timelessness of this experience, its dreamlike quality and the degree to which the protagonist is absorbed by it, is suggested in the poem by the sibilant sounds, the sinuous, continuous rhythm of the protagonist’s account, and the almost total lack of end stops to the printed lines. At the moment of choice, the rhythm is halted by the hard consonants which imitate the jarring ‘voice’ of the bell, breaking the hypnotic spell and recalling the protagonist to the realities of his present journey. To achieve wholeness and enlightenment he must reject this beautiful option and, in Eliot’s words, “go by the way in which there is no ecstasy”²⁴.

The final two lines of the poem restate the spiritual nature of the protagonist’s quest. In many religions, as in Alchemy, ‘flesh and blood’ correspond to the ‘inward and hidden fire’ (MC.15f) of the god or goddess which is ritually and (usually) symbolically ingested by the worshippers in order to absorb the holy spirit. So, the path to which the protagonist is summoned by the bell is the difficult one of selfless communion with the deity, rather than that of self-absorbed ecstasy from which there is no escape or progress.

The animals, as the protagonist observed, were absorbed in a dance that “never stopped / Or left anything old or reached any new thing”. They will remain, physically and spiritually, in the dark wood. Such a fate is represented with graphic symbolism in Baskin’s illustration for this poem, where only the heads of the dancing birds are visible and their bodies remain hidden in the engulfing blackness.

‘ A riddle ’

‘A Monkey Eating Eagle’(SP)

‘ Incomparable marriage ’(ED)

‘ Mother of Inevitables ’(ED)

‘Mother of judgment – the tongue of truth gives’ 25

The Monkey–Eating Eagle claims to be his daughter in the heaven of eagles. Whether he likes it or not, he now has to marry her. (and) His fate, it seems, is to become the child in her womb.

Once again the protagonist has arrived at the threshold between death and life; at the interface between the Underworld and the natural world “Of wind and of sun, of rock and water”. Again, he must pass the threshold guardian’s test before he may proceed. Like the two headed gatekeeper which was encountered earlier, the Monkey–Eating Eagle of this poem has a double nature, but its duality is expressed in the paradoxes of its riddle rather than by its physical appearance.

Using a style which resembles the traditional riddle form of Old English verse. Hughes presents the paradox of the eagle’s nature in two line stanzas each of which embodies

an opposition. These brief statements, following the peremptory bluntness of the opening question, convey the primitive, arresting power of the eagle. The pattern of its riddle brings to an end the fluid, dreamlike mood of the previous poems which had already faltered at the notes of the summoning bell. The question and the questioner, whose clues to the riddle compound the enigma, block the protagonist's progress as effectively as Baskin's eagle fills the frame of its picture.

Both the situation and the question have well known parallels in Greek mythology, as they do, also, in the Book of Job. Oedipus, on the borders of his birth place is confronted by the man-eating sphinx and her riddle; Ulysses, trapped in the dark womb-like cave of cannibalistic Polyphemos, gains egress by a careful answer to its question; and Job, before his release from torment (a re-creation which Blake depicts in Plate 14) is confronted by God with a long series of rhetorical questions²⁶. Even the questing birds in Attar's allegorical poem must answer the noble chamberlain's questions before the door to the Simurgh is opened for them. In each case the questions concern the nature, purpose and importance of Man. They resemble those questions which Hughes' Wodwo asks itself (THCP.183): "What am I?", "What am I doing here ...?", "what shall I be called...?". And the answers require a self-knowledge which, in the spiritual context, is a necessary prerequisite for knowledge of God. Common to all spiritual quests is the necessity to 'Know thyself', for, as Mohammed wrote, "He who knows himself knows the Lord"²⁷.

An essential part of self-knowledge is the recognition of the physical mortality and spiritual endurance which comprise the dual, mortal and immortal, aspects of human existence. Oedipus recognises the enigma of the sphinx as physically mutable and mortal Man; Ulysses' answer to Polyphemos' question, although presented in the story as a trick, involves humility and a denial of his physical self – he is 'Nobody'; Job must reject his pride and selfhood and, as Blake's illustration implies, must "humbly recognise God's supremacy and acknowledge that he is in God's image, not contrariwise, as before"²⁸. Attar's birds, also, come to recognise their own non-existence apart from the Simurgh²⁹. In all these stories self-knowledge is essential before the heroes can complete their journeys.

Job Plate 14

The answer to the riddle which now tests the Cave Birds protagonist demands a similar recognition of his own duality and his relationship to the questioner. The content of the riddle retraces the protagonist's journey, which the questioner has shared, although her experience of it has been very different. The very nature of this female bird's participation, however, demonstrates that she and he are complementary halves of a unit (as in the earlier poem, 'Actaeon'); and the changing balance between male and female is restated. It is clear that this she-eagle has been both victim (like the Plaintiff) and then victor (like the Vulture in 'She seemed so considerate'); and her riddle is solved only by the recognition that she is the essential female element in the protagonist's life, representative of the Goddess, and inextricably linked to him as his daughter, his bride and, now, his mother. As she tells him in the version of the poem published by Scolar Press, she is his "creator"; and in a draft version:

I am what you have brought, neither more nor less.

I am what you are worth ...

I am the collection of your parts

As an eagle, symbol of the sun, the questioner is as much 'a bird of light' as was the owl in 'The plaintiff', but the light which she now brings to the protagonist's darkness has grown stronger. She is to be his "saviour mother"(SP) whose love will "cast out the love evil / That gorged only itself"(SP. And by devouring this mischievous and primitive 'monkey' – this proud, trickster of a man – she will marry his being to hers and accomplish his rebirth.

From such an 'incomparable marriage' will come the resolution of this complex riddle, and a whole, new being will be born. Yet, whilst the world which this being enters will be "changed" by his new awareness, the she-eagle promises to deliver him into the fundamentally "unchangeable world" of the elements, wind (air), sun (fire), rock (earth) and water, "to cry". Not only is this the natural response of all newborn creatures, but, because the protagonist has been chosen by the bird-beings to undertake this journey of enlightenment, it may also suggest that these bird-beings intend him to pass on to others the knowledge and experience which he thus gains.

Hughes' alternative title for the she-eagle which is his, and his protagonist's, creation is 'Mother of Inevitables'. This not only conveys the inexorable nature of the she-eagle's will, but it also echoes the title of the Siberian Yakut people's magical, iron-feathered she-eagle, the 'Mother of Animals'. Significantly, this creature is the mother of the Yakut shamans who mediate between the spirit world and the natural world of their communities³⁰. And it is worth noting, too, that Hughes' Monkey-Eating Eagle has appeared before in his work in shamanic guise. In a nightmarish story, *The Threshold* (published 1979 in a limited edition), the threshold guardian is an enigmatic old man, "grey and huddled and hairy and filthy" like Hughes' various tramps³¹. The old man's nose is "hooked, hawklike", and his eye is "like an alert owl's", or like that of "a monkey-eating eagle": but he appears, also, in a shamanic ritual as "a shaggy half-human figure, like a wolf on its hind-legs standing on a high conical hill, beating a drum and turning in a slow circle singing"³². So, like the eagle-owl/protagonist of 'A riddle', this threshold guardian also combines animal and human qualities, and he, too, has the shamanic power of moving between the material world and the Otherworld of the spirit.

' The scapegoat '

'The Sacrifice '

' The Scapegoat Culprit '(ED)

' A Stud Cockerel Hunted in a Desert '(ED)

' The Culprit'(SP)

'Scapegoat vanities and earthly Illusions ' 33.

His marriage, the opposite of a physical marriage, is celebrated by driving out of him a Cockerel as a scapegoat, a sacrifice to Eagles.

In this poem and the next ('After there was nothing there was a woman') Hughes depicts the biological essence of man and of woman. At the same time he presents two vivid pictures of the kind of exclusive and divisive self-absorption of which the protagonist has been accused.

As Baskin's etching shows, the scapegoat or culprit of the first poem is the same proud cockerel, "lord of middens", whose "imbecile" pride was demonstrated in 'The accused'. He is, also, the "love creature that gorges only itself" (a phrase which appears in almost every version of the poem except the one published in the Faber edition) and it is this selfhood which the Monkey-Eating Eagle intends to drive out.

Once again, there is a parallel in Blake's illustrations for story of Job. Plate 16 is embellished with the texts, "The Prince of this World shall be cast out" and "Even devils are subject to Us thro' thy Name", and it shows God casting Satan into the flames. Blake's unique interpretation of the biblical text shows two smaller 'devils' also being cast down, and these have been identified as "the obstructive self hoods of Job and his wife"³⁴. God's judgment condemns the self-righteous to Hell and, in explanatory notes for a lost picture of 'The Last Judgment', Blake wrote: "In Hell all is Self Righteousness", and "Whenever any Individual Rejects Error & embraces Truth, a Last Judgment passes on that Individual"³⁵. Outside the sacrificial fires, Job and his wife watch this spectacle fearlessly, their position and attitudes demonstrating their new-found awareness and spiritual strength.

Blake Plate 16

A scapegoat is a traditional sacrifice required by the gods, and Hughes' scapegoat /cockerel will take with it all the selfish appetites of the flesh, the vanities and the earthly illusions which must be cast out of the protagonist before he can make a new spiritual beginning. This cockerel, although helplessly driven by lust, greed, superstition and foolish pride, is yet a "beautiful thing". His "wealth" is his seed. his "sweetnesses" the "hot weakness" of sexual passion, and his opalescent beauty is but skin deep, yet he embodies energies which are essential to life. "Posterity", which inherits his debts, can exist only because of the biological urges which rule his life. He embodies the paradox which Blake summed up in two of his 'Proverbs of Hell':

The pride of the peacock is the glory of God.

The lust of the goat is the bounty of God (MHH. 8:4-5).

Hughes' cockerel is "The joker" in the "confederate pack". Like The Fool in Tarot card readings he is a symbol of human folly, frivolity, rashness and naivety, and of the Dionysian elements in Man³⁶. However, just as the Tarot Fool is linked by Cabbalists with 'aleph' (the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and "the beginning of all"³⁷, so the scapegoat is responsible for new life, both biologically and symbolically.

The complexity of Hughes' imagery in this poem is a reflection of the complexity of human beings. Through it, he manages to convey not only the powerful sensual pleasures of sexual desire and the barely contained tangle of superstitions and false beliefs which lie beneath the "panoply" of skin, but also the intricate workings of heredity

by which Man's 'sins' may be visited on his children – "An I.O.U. signed by posterity" which includes, perhaps, Mankind's inheritance of the original sin of the biblical parents, Adam and Eve.

Ultimately, in this poem Hughes mocks the belief that immortality can be ensured by succumbing to the dictates of the body and its sexuality. Such a course is profligate spending of valuable energy, "A slaking of thistles", and as false and full of irony as Hughes' description of this cockerel as "the lord of immortality".

So, despite his beauty, the cockerel is predominantly a creature of darkness. In Baskin's etching, the voluptuous and exotic bird stands just on the edge of the light. In the poem, too, the sunlight touches him only in "chill draughts" and, having gambled his body and lost, he finally becomes nothing but "a smear on the light". This is the small obstacle to the life-giving energies of the sun which the Monkey-Eating Eagle now removes.

'After there was nothing there was a woman '

At moments it seems (?) as if he were increasingly human, but somehow as if unborn, as if he were still inside the womb of some woman (female) who is herself of dubious reality.

In many ways this poem is complementary to the previous one, constituting the second half of a pair which deals with similarities and opposites. Instead of a comically active male who foolishly squanders his sexual energies, we are shown a passive female basking in her natural reproductive function. The cockerel is an empty carcase, "frilled" and bejewelled, and linked with the sun: the woman is naked, full of new life, and linked with nature, the sea and (by association) the moon. In their self-absorption, however, the two are alike: as they are, also, in the instrumental roles which they play in the protagonist's rebirth. If the cockerel is a foolish and sinful Adam, then this woman is a sensuous and feminine Eve.

The woman, like the cockerel, is a beautiful creature. Her delight in the "winding and unwinding" rhythms of Nature which she finds within her, her glowing acceptance of her function, and her gentle incomprehension and "soldierly bearing" in the face of events over which she has no control, all mitigate the vanity and self-love which are apparent in her urge to caress and decorate her body.

The mood which pervades the poem conveys not only the woman's reverential attitude to her body, but also the awesome wonder and complexity of the creative process of which she is ("but only just") a part. Another of Blake's 'Proverbs of Hell' – "The nakedness of woman is the work of God" (MHH 8:7) – seems very apt: and Hughes, too, makes a connection between this woman and some higher powers. The predominance of natural imagery in the poem and the description of the woman's origin, suggest her relationship to the Mother Goddess, vulture headed Hathor, and to Hecate, the Moon Goddess whose symbol is a dog. In addition, the "vulture's gullet", the "droppings of the wild dog", and the "long toil of earthworms" are all part of the regenerative pattern of Nature, the cycle of life and death which has provided Hughes

with a consistent and unifying metaphor for the Cave Birds protagonist's spiritual transformation.

The woman's connection with the Monkey-Eating Eagle is established in the introductory note to the poem, and the protagonist's feeling that she is 'of dubious reality' is consistent with the strange 'marriage' of identities which is taking place. It is a marriage in which the cockerel, the woman, the eagle and the protagonist all take part and by which, as is explicitly stated in some early drafts of the poem, the protagonist is "stripped ... of his clay", his "soils"(ED), and is reborn in a purified state.

Baskin's etching of the woman conveys well the mingling of identities which takes place in the transforming marriage. Her head, feet and feathers are those of a bird, but her full belly and breasts are made very obvious, emphasising the tiny, "ant-like head and soldierly bearing" of a gravid woman.

' The guide '

'A Scarecrow Swift'(SP)

' The Guide '(SP)

'The (One) Guide'(ED)

'The True Guide ' 38.

At the same time (And it seems as if) his journey (progress advance) through the heaven of eagles is (were) only just beginning.

Stripped of its earthy soils, the hero's spirit re-emerges into the world like a new creature (the Scolar Press version begins: "The Chick ruptures its shell then stops dazzled"). From this newborn state it can grow to achieve great things, yet it needs guidance and protection. So, a new bird-being appears. It starts where the new creature stops, in the dazzling light of its new world; it comes "from what is left"(ED); and it comes to change the protagonist's Earth-bound state and to guide him through "the heaven of eagles".

In folklore, the swift (like the swallow) is a sacred bird connected with the soul³⁹. For Hughes, it has always been a symbol of freedom and energy, an expression of primitive forces, a "goblin savage"(SS.28) – herald of the summer. This association with summer and the sun gives it sacred significance. Hughes calls it "my little Apollo"(SS.28) and, in 'The Swift comes the swift'(M.164), it becomes a symbol for a fallen creature which, in resurrection,

Casts aside the two-arm two-leg article–

The pain instrument

Flesh and soft entrails and nerves, and is off.

It is a bird which joins Heaven and Earth, shearing "between life and death", like a meteorite "puncturing the veils of worlds".

In 'The guide', the speed and energy of the swift is less violently evoked than in Hughes' other poems, but it is suggested by the "Tumbling worlds" over which the bird flies, by

the scouring winds which empty the clinging protagonist, and in the sense of movement and release which the imagery of the poem generates. Most apparent, however, is the swift's link with the spiritual world to which it is 'the true guide' (Baskin's title). It is like a "Magnetic" needle, pointing the way to the Northern realms where lie the world axis and Mankind's earliest mythical Heaven, and which are also the home of the Sun-Eagle, the mythological mother of the Yakut shamans.

The need for a true guide is acknowledged in both shamanic and gnostic beliefs. Shamanic guides teach the necessary skill of flight between Heaven and Earth so that the shaman can intercede between gods and humans: gnostic guides, such as Mohammed and Christ, show man the path, 'The Way' to Heaven: Blake, too, at this stage in the story of Job, depicts in Plate 17 a spiritual guide. This illustration shows God blessing Job and his wife, but Blake has filled the lower borders of his picture with Christ's words proclaiming the identity of God and Christ, and His guidance towards Man's union with both:

I and my Father are one.

If you had known me ye would have known my Father also ...

He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father and I will love him and manifest myself to him. And my Father will love him and we will come unto him and make our abode in him.

Job Plate 17

In Hughes' poem, as in these other cases, the guide's help is effective only after Man has attained a certain degree of spiritual freedom. Now that the Earthly and physical restraints have been thrown off, the protagonist's spirit can soar free. It is guided through winds which, like Pentecostal fires or the fearsome tornado of Karma described in the Bardo Thodol⁴⁰, cleanse, scour and empty him so that the creator's re-vivifying breath may flow gently in. The true guide, like Mercury, leads his followers to enlightenment and resurrection: and the wind is the alchemical wind which carries the "one thing", the pure alchemical gold, "in its belly"⁴¹.

Still, in this poem, the unifying metaphor of Nature's birth/death cycles is present. The scarecrow, mentioned in the Scholar Press title, was once an image of the crucified fertility god⁴², and its cross-shape symbolises the death and resurrection of the god who gives all natural things life (just as the Christian cross symbolises the death of Christ who is known as 'Our Saviour'). The cross, however, is also an alchemical symbol representing the combination of the four elements – air, fire, earth and water; the four qualities – hot, dry, wet and cold: and the four directions – north, south, east and west.

Baskin's swift is symbolically cross-shaped, its wings are spread for flight and its firm stance suggests strength and reliability. Its form is also strongly reminiscent of the many winged gods of mythology who are symbolised by the Ansate cross in which the extremities are split like the legs of birds or humans. The most notable of these gods, in relation to Hughes' poem, are Isis, whose wing-beats "transmitted the breath of life to

the dead Osiris⁴³, and the ancient Persian sun-god, Ahura Mazda.

Ahura Mazda

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Stage Four of the Alchemical Synthesis

Conjunction, Crystallisation, Projection

Once Mercury and Sulphur (now known as the Red Male and the White Female¹) have been extracted from the original alchemical mixture and purified, they must be recombined, because 'Perfect Mercury, for the generation of the work, has need of a female'².

In Norton's Ordinal of Alchemy we can read the usual alchemical metaphor for this process:

Then is the faire white woman Mariede to the rodie mane³.

On symbolic, psychiatric and material levels this next stage of the alchemical process entails, as the metaphor suggests, the marriage of opposing elements male/female, body/soul, mercury/sulphur. This 'Conjunction', or 'Chemical Marriage', is described by both Burckhardt and Jung as the central symbol of Alchemy, and it is more complex than a simple uniting of opposites.

The Chemical Marriage, like all other alchemical processes, occurs more than once in the sequence of alchemical events, and this repetition is paralleled in Hughes' sequence of poems. So, 'The gatekeeper', 'The riddle', 'His legs ran about' and 'Bride and groom lie hidden for three days' each present a marriage of opposites. In each poem the elements (both alchemical and human) become progressively purer until, in this final alchemical stage, a perfect union is achieved and the alchemical goal attained.

On the spiritual level, early Alchemists such as Gerhard Dorn explained the first conjunction of the final alchemical stages as the union of soul and spirit, a mental union which follows the overcoming of the body⁴. 'A riddle' (CB.44), in the Cave Birds sequence, describes just such a 'marriage' – one which is, in Hughes' words, "the opposite of a physical marriage". Following this, however, the process must be repeated for, as Dorn writes:

This first union does not yet make the wise man, but only the mental discipline of wisdom. The second union of the mind with the body shows forth the wise man

...(MC.476).

The second union, in *Cave Birds*, occurs in 'His legs ran about'. Psychologically, Jung interprets this second union as a necessary recombination "of the spiritual position with the body" so that insights gained by "confrontation with the shadow" (or examination of the sub-conscious) may be "made real" or objectified and used (MC.476). Burckhardt, in his chapter on the 'Chemical Marriage', criticises this interpretation and points out that although such an "'integration' of unconscious powers of the soul into the ego-consciousness" is necessary, in alchemical-spiritual terms it leaves the process incomplete, because it produces precisely the ego-centred state from which the Alchemist has been striving for release. What is left out by such a description is the creative power, the "Divine ray" or "Pure Spirit", and it is this which brings the marriage to perfection and completes the whole work⁵. In the alchemical process, this divine creative power is the sun, the energy of which is present in the fires of the Alchemist's furnace.

Initially, the second conjunction of the pure red and white elements (the results of the earlier procedures) is fuelled by the natural generative fires of the mixture itself, for which the alchemical metaphor is sexual energy. From this union there emerges a pure crystalline substance, a gem, which must be subjected to the fierce sun-fires of the furnace (the 'fourth degree of fire', 'destructor sensus' (destroyer of the senses)⁶ to test its perfection. Now, if all is well, there appears

the Phoenix, the strange flashing white jewel, the flower, the expanding feathers of white fire⁷.

The Phoenix is the alchemical symbol for the complete transmutation. It precedes, with a display of brilliant colours, the appearance of the 'incorruptible elixir', the True Stone, the Quintessence which can transmute base material into gold and in which, finally, "the four elements are by our masterie joyned, knitt and united together one with another"⁸.

The Phoenix

In the *Cave Birds* sequence, the poems from 'His legs ran about' to 'The risen' comprise the final stage of the alchemical process. They are full of the imagery of fire and light, and a mood of awesome wonder and delight builds progressively towards the climax of ecstatic release when, in 'The risen', the eagle soars, free and powerful, across the face of the sun.

The 'conjunction' which takes place in 'His legs ran about' is fuelled by sexual energy. It results in the rebirth of the protagonist in a state of 'bare' purity which frees him from all the influences of the material world around him. In this state he is able to meet the female on an equal basis, and together they begin to rebuild their material bodies and their new relationship, using the sun to test the perfection of each stage. Heralded by the appearance of the terrifyingly beautiful 'owl flower', a sun-bird which emerges phoenix-like from the fiery flames, there comes the ultimate spiritual transcendence. The protagonist embodies divine powers and soars free of the Earth to fly in the realm of the sun.

So, the divided elements of the Earth and of Mankind are eventually purified, recombined and divinely illuminated; and the alchemical work is complete. Yet, Mercurius is always elusive and the soul “always inclines to the body” and is ready to “slip back into its former unconsciousness without taking with it anything of the light of the spirit into the darkness of the body”(MC.522). The illuminated one, the alchemical gold, can be of value to humankind only by being brought into contact again with the unregenerate, worldly, base material. Psychological insights, too, are easily forgotten. Consequently, the alchemical process is never truly finished, but must be, like its constituent procedures, constantly repeated.

‘His legs ran about’

The vision of the earthly woman revives more strongly, and he is no longer entirely unborn, though not completely born either, with consequent confusions.

In theology, in Alchemy and in psychology, a true guide invariably leads the seeker to the ultimate goal by the way of knowledge, acceptance and, most importantly, love. Love is foremost in the final reintegration of the elements, whatever their nature, because love has the ability to ‘marry’ disparate entities and channel their conjoint powers into harmonious and productive paths.

In myth and in early theogenies, the mating of Heaven and Earth, or of their godly or human representatives, explained and controlled the origin, fertility and continuance of the material world. Even today, sexual union is regarded as important in most religions, either being viewed as a necessary and valuable expression of sacred energies (as in Tantric and Taoist thought) or as a profane and unwelcome distraction from them (as in some forms of Christian and Buddhist asceticism). In either case, there are generally rigorous and specific rules governing the sexual act, which suggests a common apprehension of the powerful and dangerous nature of the energies involved.

The stage which has now been reached in the Cave Birds sequence parallels that of the ‘Chemical Marriage’ or ‘Conjunction’ of the alchemical elements. This stage marks the beginning of the ‘Major Work’ in Alchemy, and it is dominated by the astrological sign of Venus, Goddess of Love⁹. The sexual connotations of the conjunction were emphasised in Alchemy by the metaphors used to describe the procedure, as is evident in the many alchemical illustrations showing the copulation of a naked king and queen in a liquid medium. They were, also, carried through into the lives of the Alchemists themselves, where the guidance and help of a female partner (a soror mystica) was considered essential to the work. The writings of the alchemists Thomas Vaughan and Nicholas Flamel, for example, indicate the important role played by their wives, and Kathleen Raine and others who see alchemical parallels in the art and writing of William Blake also point to the involvement of his wife, Catherine, in that work.

Love, however, is not completely defined by the physical act of coition. There is also an emotional/spiritual aspects to it; a joyous, expansive outflow of energy which can be shared without physical contact.

The separation of one aspect from any other, like the separation of our inner and outer worlds, would run counter to the whole pattern of Hughes' thought and his avowed purpose of working towards unity and balance. So, when the 'Scarecrow Swift' guides the Cave Birds protagonist into the way of love, all of love's aspects are encompassed, and this poem attempts to describe this experience.

Beginning with the poem's title, which carries its energy on into the opening lines, Hughes uses the rhythm and flow of words and images to capture the driving urgency of desire. The bodies tangle, "trip", grope and push towards each other, but there is also a sense of timelessness and fulfilment conveyed by certain words ("forever", "finally") and by unpunctuated repetitions ("at last at last", "deeper deeper"). As each part of the body is dealt with, action is followed by gratification and active 'masculine' words give way to softer 'feminine' ones: the "tangled" bodies become "enwoven", and the man's hard "chest" meets the woman's soft "breast" and rests there "at the end of everything", its needs met.

Opposites join in words, imagery and mood to create a harmonious unity and, like Yin and Yang, they belong to each other, the one mirroring every aspect of the other "like a mirror face down flat on a mirror". This mirror image is important in alchemical, Taoist and Buddhist teaching. Philosopher and Alchemist, Ibn Arabi, wrote: The world of nature consists of many forms which are reflected in a single mirror – nay, rather that there is a single form reflected in many mirrors¹⁰.

This is a statement of the Hermetic rule that "whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracle of the one thing"¹¹, and alchemical illustrations of the copulation of the Red King and White Queen make the same point by showing them suspended at the surface of a reflective pool.

Conjunction

An even more important aspect of mirrors is mentioned by Jean Cooper in her study of Chinese Alchemy. She writes:

A mirror hanging face-downwards in a temple establishes an axis of light by which the soul can ascend heavenwards, but as reflected light it also represents the manifest world of illusion. In this way the mirror also combines the two great powers; it is the reflected light of the moon, known as the 'golden mirror', and at the same time the disc of the sun ¹².

Like Yin and Yang, the man and woman in Hughes' poem are a necessary and natural part of a whole, and the dynamics of their separation and their drive towards unity are those of Nature. Hughes expresses this in his choice of similes: each part needs the other

Like a bull pushing towards its cows, not to be stayed
Like a calf seeking its mama
Like a desert staggerer, among his hallucinations

Seeking the hoof-churned hole

Union brings peace and stillness, and “such greatness and truth”, which descend like a blessing.

Once more the protagonist is re-made and the male and female halves of his nature combined. With images of a starlit grave and a new and tiny world rushing through space, Hughes now links Heaven and Earth and gives the protagonist's experience a cosmic framework so that, despite his tiny and raw state, neither he, nor we, feel any sense of confinement. Instead, there is a feeling of “astonishment” and exhilaration; of being part of a vast and energetic universe. Inner and outer worlds have been reconciled and a moment of complete unity has been achieved.

Baskin's drawing, perhaps unexpectedly, shows not two people, nor even an androgynous being like those which commonly illustrate this stage in alchemical texts.

Alchemical Androgyne

It is, however, unquestionably a version of the numeral, One, the symbol of unity. A passage in Jung's discussion of the alchemical ‘Conjunction’ is enlightening here, and it seems particularly relevant to Hughes' lines which describe the earth as “bristling and raw, tiny and lost/ ... Rushing through the vast astonishment”. Writing of the Alchemist, Gerhard Dorn, Jung says:

The One and Simple is what Dorn called the unus mundus.... For him the third and highest degree of conjunction was the union of the whole man with the unus mundus. By this he meant... the potential world of the first day of creation, when nothing was yet ‘in actu’, i.e. divided into two and many, but was still one. The creation of unity by a magical procedure meant the possibility of effecting a union with the world – not with the world of multiplicity as we see it but with a potential world (MC.534).

Considering Hughes' belief in the magical powers of poetry¹³, it seems very likely that this was the unity which he was attempting to achieve in this poem. By it, his protagonist, who is also Socrates and Everyman, is re-created not just in Early Egypt (which was Hughes' stated intention) but at the very beginning of the world. So he is able to start afresh, free from pre-established constraints.

Cooper notes that the whole work of alchemy is “the spiritualisation of the body and the embodiment of the spirit”, and that “the conjunctio is the same as the mystic's union with the One, the loss of individual identity with the limitations of the ego dissolved in the perfect whole”; but there is also a much greater purpose, and she quotes Eliade, who writes that “the aim of the opus magnum was at once the freeing of the human soul and the healing of the cosmos”¹⁴. Hughes' poem, too, links the human world with the universe.

Jung, too, states that the goal of the Alchemist is to “spiritualise the body”(MC.535), and the absence of body in Baskin's drawing is evident. The halo-like feathers which frame the bird's head suggest its enlightened, spiritual nature, just as a halo is used to symbolise divine illumination in religious pictures. A halo or nimbus is also a common

feature of primitive drawings of shamans and sun-gods or their human representatives, and it is regarded as symbolic of the embodiment of magical/divine powers¹⁵.

'Walking bare'

'A Crow of Prisms'(SP)

'Crossing the Crystal Desert' 16

At the same time he seems to be journeying into the sun. He is being drawn through the heaven of eagles as if into the sun itself.

A sketch made by Hughes on one of the manuscript copies of this poem held by Exeter University shows the head and part of the body of a snake superimposed on a crescent moon:

SnakeMoon

Symbolically, the moon represents a purified soul, and the snake the latent powers of Nature¹⁷. This poem deals with exactly this combination. Humility, self-knowledge and love have brought the protagonist to a state of new-born purity. That which has survived the journey is the most precious essence, the spiritual "gem" of himself, and the paronomasia of 'gem' with 'germ' not only reiterates the "tiny", "raw" state of the new substance which is atomic, indivisible, "beyond assay" and just at its atomic weight, but it also conveys the idea of a germ-seed with inherent strength and potential. Now, unprotected and unadorned, the 'gem' will be exposed to the fierce heat and light of the sun in the "crystal desert" (Baskin's title). Whilst the natural metaphor of a new-born creature, fragile and "blood wrapped", is carried through the poem, the imagery is also specifically alchemical for, at this stage in the process, Alchemists describe the slow emergence and growth of "a crystalline formation"¹⁸.

The desert is symbolically a place of spiritual testing and divine revelation. The pure bare 'gem', when exposed to the sun's fires, may strengthen and multiply or, because it is fragile and vulnerable, it may be destroyed. Infinite care must be taken. The Alchemist, now, will take his bellows to the furnace, increasing its heat 'breath by breath' until the first atom of new-born substance multiplies and begins to crystallise out of the menstruum. Similarly, the protagonist must proceed with utmost caution in "the heaven of the eagles", progressing infinitely slowly and being tested and strengthened by the sun until (to use common terms of enlightenment) his whole view of the world is altered, he sees things in a new light, and worldly affairs no longer impinge upon him.

Even at this stage in the alchemical process the cycle of 'solve et coagula' continues. Slowly, as the heat increases, the new crystal formation "melts into an amber-coloured liquid which gradually becomes thicker and thicker until it sinks into a black earth on the bottom of the glass"¹⁹.

Yet, the 'gem' survives. Like a germ of alchemical gold, or the powerful magical crystal of a shaman, it is "the repository as well as the transceiver of illumination"²⁰ and it survives to 'seed' the transformation which, if conditions are right, should soon follow.

The protagonist, too, although immune to worldly affairs, is not yet completely free. He is touched by “one gravity”, which is both the attractive force of the sun which controls his movement (holding him in orbit like a “planet”) and, also, a sobering knowledge that he is “the appointed” being carrying within him the “spark” of illumination.

The fire and light of the sun pervade this poem and the mood is tentative but sure. The first two stanzas, with their clear statements of the protagonist’s situation, establish the “bare certainty, without confection” from which he begins to fly upwards: and the repetition of ‘li’ sounds between lines 11 and 15 reinforces the lifting mood. In the protagonist’s shifting perspective, Hughes conveys his growing strength and movement and the exhilaration of his flight. At the same time, he contrasts the solid and Earthly (the “mountains of torment”, “Hurrying worlds of voices”, and “traffic”) with space and light (“skylines”, “wider wings”, “simpler light”). The single line, “A one gravity keeps touching me”, creates a pause in the momentum which reinforces its sense. In the following couplets the solar metaphor encapsulates the paradox of the protagonist’s insignificance but importance, whilst the rhythms express his wonderment at his situation. Finally, the image of a spark swept by the “breath” of the sun’s “corolla” precisely captures the protagonist’s position: like a spark, he embodies some of the sun’s fire and light and thus has generative potential; and, like the corolla of petals which protects the generative parts of a flower and attracts insects to ensure fertilisation, the corolla of warmth and light around the sun will protect and nourish him, as it does all the bodies which are held within its range.

Baskin’s illustration shows a bird whose feathers are like a spiky crystalline growth. It stands solidly on its raptorial feet but there is some suggestion of streaming movement in the dark lines behind it which have left traces in the light on the right-hand side of the page. There is, however, no sign of the gem-like crystalline beauty and purity which characterises the protagonist in the poem. Nor does the picture convey any sense of the exhilaration of flight, or of the wonderful potential of the bird. This is, perhaps, the least satisfying of all Baskin’s Cave Birds illustrations in terms of its relevance to the poem.

‘Bride and groom lie hidden for three days’

Somehow the earthly woman has become his bride. They have just found each other, hardly created yet, on an earth not easily separable from the heaven of the eagles.

Three is an extremely powerful number in mythology, Alchemy and religion, where it is frequently associated with the relationship between gods and humans. It is, according to Dorn, “peculiar to Adam ” who is “offspring of the unarius” (the unity, One, God)(MC.367). It is often used to symbolise the time which elapses between a human being’s personal past and their re-creation as a god, or a being with god-like powers 21. The neophyte shaman ‘dies’ and ‘goes away’ for three years which seem like only three days before returning with shamanic powers²²; Christ remained three days in the tomb before his resurrection; and in Alchemy, the Phoenix (whose presence is first intimated by the pure white crystalline growth) dies and “remains dead for three days, the dark of the moon”(MC.135). Confirming its solar/lunar nature, Ripley writes:

In Loosing of the bodie the water congealed shall be,
Then shall the bodie die utterlie of the flixe,
Bleeding and changing colours, as you shall see,

The third day againe to life shall arise,
And devoure birds and beasts of the widernesse,

....

In bus and nibus he shalle arise and descend,
Up to the Moone, and sith up to the Sunne²³.

Now that Hughes' protagonist has been reunited with the female half of his own nature and has become a part of Nature itself, he can leave behind his personal past and begin to make his life anew. In particular he can build a new relationship with an "earthly woman" which is based on equality. So, Hughes' 'bride and groom' spend three days hidden from the world and, step by step, "with infinite care", they "Bring each other to perfection".

In this poem, Hughes uses both shamanic and alchemical symbolism for the re-embodiment. Eliade describes the re-creation of the shaman after mystical death, dismemberment and reduction to a skeleton, as a process in which "the skeleton is brought back to life by being given new flesh"²⁴: this is the main metaphor of Hughes' poem. Alchemical imagery, however, is also present throughout. Like the Alchemist and his soror mystica who make 'Our Gold' from base materials, this man and woman find their new forms among "rubble", and they are "Like two gods of mud / Sprawling in the dirt". There is a pervading mood of divine inspiration, and the couple feel "fearfulness and astonishment" and "wonderment" at the "superhuman" task which they accomplish. And, just as the alchemical gold is tested by the fierce heat of the furnace, the man and woman ensure that "They bring each other to perfection" by repeatedly

... taking each other to the sun,
they find they can easily
To test each new thing at each new step.

As Hughes' man and woman in their "inspired" state re-assemble their bodies, the life energies re-animate them, and the whole process becomes one of joy and wonder at their own, and the other's, beauty. It is typical of Hughes' descriptions of Nature that each part of the body is conjured into imaginative being by a precise and beautiful detail – the "shiningly oiled" articulations of the hips; the teeth "tied" by their nerves to the spinal "centrepin" of the body; the "little circlets" on the skin of "her fingertips"; and the "steely purple silk" of the veins beneath the skin which "stitch" the body together.

There is warmth and humour, too, in Hughes' descriptions. No sooner are the man's hands fitted than "they go feeling all over her". No sooner is the woman's spine in order than she is "twisting this way and that" and laughing with delight. The "delicate cogs" of the woman's mouth suggest her talkativeness, and the "deep-cut scrolls" at the nape of the man's neck his sensuous muscularity. As image follows image, the beautifully precise mechanical structures of the bodies with all their 'fittings' and 'parts' become two

living, moving people.

Combined with the anatomical precision, the humour and the wonder, there is sensuality. Hughes' evocation of emotions, the joy and delight of the physical beauty of the two bodies, is linked with images which have sexual and sensuous connotations. The foot, through which man makes contact with the earth, is an ancient symbol of fertility and it is associated, also, with the sun-gods: when the woman connects the man's feet for him "his whole body lights up". In Tantric belief, where sexual rituals have religious significance, the cosmic life force, kundalini energy, is channelled through the body along a single pathway which is exactly replicated in Hughes' poem as the man "connects her throat, her breasts and the pit of her stomach / With a single wire". The woman "inlays with deep-cut scrolls the nape of his neck", a part of the body which not only has symbolic columnar strength, but which also has great erotic power. (In Japan the nape is kept covered for this reason, and in Ancient Greece it was believed that "the pains and smouldering fire of love enter keenest deep down beneath the nape of the neck"²⁵). Step by step, as the man and woman bring each other to completion, the pace and energy of the lines increase until, with erotic delicacy, "He sinks into place the inside of her thighs" and their delight climaxes in gasps of joy and "cries of wonderment" as they sprawl in the dirt. So, the sexual energies are subtly woven into the poem and help to bring about the god-like perfection which is realised in the final line.

Baskin's illustration of the half-human, half-bird, male and female has a certain naive humour about it. The couple are concerned only with each other and are given equal importance in the picture where their nakedness and their actions are quite appropriate. Sadly, however, the picture seems to lack the beauty and sensuality of the poem. This is not so in Blake's 20th plate for the story of Job, which illustrates Job's acceptance of the essential equality of male and female. In this etching the central figures of Job and his daughters express harmonious balance, and the surrounding texts indicate Job's recognition of God's universal presence. Unlike the situation in earlier plates, the women now lean against their father and are the focus of his attention, and there is sensuality and beauty in the coils of their hair and the fall of their robes²⁶. There is sensuality, too, in the vigorous and fruitful vines, the musical instruments and the embracing angels in the frame around Blake's picture. As in Hughes' poem, all the energies – divine, human, and artistic – have now been combined, and the spiritual journey is almost complete.

Job Plate 20

'The owl flower'

'The Good Angel'(SP)

'The Angel with Good News' 27.

The Sun Being, in its aspect of Benevolence, is an owl which is also a flower. The judgment of the Eagles, evidently, is that he should be reborn.

Directly following the climax of wonder and joy which the new and perfect human beings have achieved, there comes a "last anguish"(ED) – the "big terror" of a divine revelation. In fierce head-pounding, heart-pounding, light and heat, the flame-licked face of the

owl–flower Goddess, Blodeuwedd, begins to appear. Coming like an “angel” of annunciation, she is the ‘benevolent’ embodiment of the creative powers of the sun: the Goddess: the alchemical anima mundi, “the feminine half of Mercurius”, which is the animating spirit or “the immortal soul”(MC.322).

Twice already the Goddess has appeared to the Cave Bird protagonist as an owl. In her first two manifestations she came in her aspects of death (‘The plaintiff’) and love (‘A green mother’): now, she appears in the aspect of fertility and rebirth, and her body (as in Baskin’s picture) is a “brimming heaven–blossom”, a “tightening whorl of plumes”, a feathery nest of “broody petals” from which the sun’s new creation will emerge.

Almost imperceptibly at first, a separation begins to occur, and the energy of Hughes’ lines imitates the fiery blasts which mark each progressive stage of growth. Energy is concentrated in the words, rhythm and imagery of “A drumming glare, a flickering face of flames”, until a faint “signal”, a “filament of incandescence”, becomes separated from the fires both in imagery and in line position – “As it were a hair”. Then, again, the fires become a “maelstrom”, “brimming” over and “tightening” into a “whorl of plumes”, until there emerges from the fiery “dews” of their “core” – “a mote”. Now, “A leaf of the earth / Applies to it, a cooling health” and the fires are quenched, just as the assonance of these lines cools the energy created by the alliterative ‘f’s, ‘d’s and ‘s’s which have preceded them.

The movement begins again. Spinning and twisting in the “cauldron” of heat, flushed with the “sap”, “pollen” and “nectar” of Blodeuwedd’s flower essence, the mote grows to a body which begins to stir with a life of its own. In the generative imagery of the next three couplets (lines 16–21), Hughes’ Alchemy grows towards its fruition. The corn–spirit breaks from its “mummy grain”; the ship of flowers, like a Viking funerary ship, “nudges” the hero forward towards the moment of rebirth: and the “egg–stone”, the Alchemist’s transmutative “stone that is no stone”(MC.450), bursts open²⁸. In a crescendo of light, colour and heat, a “staggering thing”, newborn, unsteady and magnificent, emerges from the sun’s fires.

In the rebirth from fire which is the theme of this poem, Hughes links the Cave Birds story with mythological, spiritual and Alchemical themes. Many mythological parallels are apparent in the poem’s imagery, but the Alchemical (and hence spiritual) references are equally strong. First, the alchemical ‘Phoenix’ appears with “expanding feathers of white fire”²⁹ to herald the complete transmutation. She comes, like ‘The Good Angel’ / ‘The owl flower’, in an “incandescence” of heat, and from her glittering neck feathers the healing ‘Elixir Vitae’, the ‘Philosophers’ Stone’ will be obtained(MC.445). Following her appearance, the heat of the Alchemist’s cauldron reactivates the pure gem of crystalline gold which has lain hidden in the ashes of his mixture. Cooling ‘dews’ of pure mercury are added, “and from this conjunction it seems that a new substance is born ... a Son is born”³⁰.

As the blackness of the ashes abates, colour after colour comes and goes, rainbow colours (reminders of the mythical and shamanic rainbow bridge to the realm of the

gods) which presage the appearance of the transmutative substance. At this stage, too, Alchemists report a sweet smell, “a perfume so sweet that nothing resembling it could be found on earth”³¹ which, like the “headful of pollen” in line 13 of the poem, is “the perfume of flowers ... symbol of resurgent life”(MC.312).

With the appearance of the ‘owl flower’ the protagonist is transformed. Alchemically, in Burckhardt’s words, “The ray of Spirit acts on original nature like a magic word”³² and the embodiment of divine powers within the human is finally achieved. The alchemical ‘gold’, which is the goal of all the ‘Great Work’, has at last been made.

‘The risen’

‘The Risen Falcon’, ‘The Liberated’, ‘A Ghostly Falcon’(ED)

He is reborn as a falcon.

Reborn, the protagonist has become a falcon, a bird of the sun. Powerful and magnificent, like the bird in Baskin’s drawing, “He stands, filling the doorway” like a successful Alchemist on the threshold of illumination. Offspring of the Eagle/Sun and the ‘owl flower’ (the “Benevolent aspect of the Sun”), and intimately linked with Man, Hughes’ “ghostly falcon”(ED) also shares many of the attributes of its avian relatives. In particular, the frequent association of falcons and men in hunting activities, where the bird links the Earth-bound human with the heavens, makes this bird an appropriate choice for a symbol of the protagonist’s acceptance by, and reunion with, the spiritual energies.

Illuminated and filled with divine power, the falcon/protagonist is released “like a convict” (ED) from his earth-bound state, and soars in exultation from the “shell”, the “mess” and the muddle of the earth and the body which have nourished him³³. Free as music on the air, he escapes from the restraints of the world’s limitations, its horizons and its “clocks”, to fly to his mythological father, the source of the energies on Earth – the sun.

The power which the falcon now has is “weirdly” magical. The symbolism of the cross, and the imagery of “his shape” as “a cross eaten by light / On the Creator’s face”, signify his sacrifice and his joyous reunion with the ‘Creator’ of life on Earth: and there are connotations of divine promise for mankind in his resurrection and his resorption into the cosmic source.

As he “shifts” between Heaven and Earth, his cross-shaped shadow brings flames and torment to the dark “thickets” of the world. Even at a distance his disturbing power is felt (just as sunspots can cause earthquakes), and “Where he alights”(the phrase is deliberately ambiguous) the world is radically and apocalyptically altered. Yet, the change is both creative and destructive: like the sloughing of a skin, the “leafless apocalypse” precedes maturity and contains the promise of a new beginning – a chance to achieve, as the protagonist now has, a “burning unconsumed” state of illumination.

In the penultimate couplet of the poem, Hughes draws together all the threads of his poetic epic in a magnificent image which expresses all his own love of Nature and the

tenderness, the power, the hope and the beauty which he sees in it. The “wind–fondled crucible of his splendour”” is at once the falcon’s own body, the Earth and the Alchemist’s vessel, within which the transformation has been made. The creation which has emerged – the falcon, the “liberated” spiritual gold – brings the words of the Hermetic Emerald Tablet to fruition:

3. Its father is the sun, its mother the moon, the wind carries it in its belly, its nurse is the earth.

....

7. It rises from earth to heaven and comes down again from heaven to earth, and thus acquires the power of the realities above and the realities below. In this way you will acquire the glory of the whole world, and all darkness will leave you.³⁴

Falcon

This is the climax of the Cave Birds protagonist’s journey, as it is the supreme moment of Hughes’ poetic alchemy.

The falcon represents the achievement of cosmic unity; the resolution of chaos which the Greek philosophers and the Alchemists sought.

Hughes’ protagonist, a creature of Nature but one which began this journey alienated and divided from Nature and from his own natural energies, is now reunited with both. The transmutation is complete and, now, “The dirt becomes God”, divinely illuminated, immutable; the ‘immortal Adam’ has been re–created as the ‘diamond body’ – ‘Our Gold’: and the cycle of division and reunion has come full circle³⁵.

In the words of Basil Valentinus:

the last Matter may be changed into the first, and the first into the last [by] that Spirit penetrating all things, which presides or bears rule in all things, yet is involved and absconded matter and defilements on every side; from which if once freed, it returns to the purity of its own substance, in which it produceth all things, and is all in all³⁶.

The same completion can be seen in Blake’s final picture of Job (Plate 21). This illustration closely resembles the first illustration in Blake’s sequence, but all evidence of discord and division has gone from it and it is vibrant with life and light, music and harmony. Only one detail of the picture sounds a note of caution, and that is the presence amongst Job’s sheep of a sleeping dog, an animal which is “emblematic of accusation throughout the Bible” and which is interpreted, here, as a sign that the cycle is complete but unfinished³⁷.

Job Plate

Hughes’ sequence of poems, too, is unfinished. The alchemical ‘gold’, whether spiritual or mineral, is only of value for its ability to transmute other substances to its own pure form, and for this purpose it must be recombined with ‘Base Matter’. So, the “ghostly falcon” must return to Earth in obedience to the Hermetic instruction:

Eighthly – Ascend with the greatest sagacity from the earth to heaven and then again

descend to the earth, and unite together the powers of things superior and things inferior. Thus you will obtain the glory of the whole world, and obscurity will fly away from you³⁸.

Like a falconer releasing his falcon, the Alchemist who gives the spirit its freedom cannot restrain it, he can only wait and hope for it to return to him with its divine, creative, powers. As in Nature, which is the worldly manifestation of divine unity on which Alchemy is based, the flux of energy and matter is constant, and rebirth is but the prelude to a new cycle of death, decay and resurrection. The Goddess, in her triple aspects of Mother, Wife and Layer-out, must repeatedly be satisfied: the alchemical synthesis must be constantly repeated. The 'Great Work' is never finished.

In Ripley's words, the twelve 'gates' to the Castle (known in Arabic alchemy as the 'Treasure-House of Wisdom') have now all been opened, but the alchemist still has work to do:

Now hast thou conquered these gates twelve,
And all the Castle thou holdest at they will.
Keepe thy secrets in store to thy selfe,
And the commandments of God looke thou fuffill,
In fire see thou continue thy glasses still,
And multiply thy medicines aye more and more...³⁹.

In Cave Birds, Hughes' alchemical rituals have brought energy and unity to a chaos of themes, ideas and images, but the alchemical 'gold' of pure imaginative energy which he has distilled from this 'Base Matter' must be used in new creative endeavours if it is to be of lasting value. One poem, or even one poetic sequence, cannot heal the divisions in our world, and Hughes' comment to Faas, part of which appears as the 'Finale' of the Cave Birds sequence, makes just this point:

One poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed.⁴⁰

At the end of the ritual

.....up comes a goblin (CB.62)

And Baskin's goblin, which rises from the final page of the work, is a suitably ambiguous figure resembling a tiny eagle-owl – Hughes' own poetic symbol of the Goddess.

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Notes written by Mr Eric W. White, a committee member of the Arts Council in 1975,

and the person responsible for negotiating the sale of the drafts of *Cave Birds* to University of Exeter Library are kept with the manuscripts at Exeter University. Information about these notes was provided by D. Wyn Evans, Deputy Librarian of the University Library.

White's notes provide interesting background information for the sequence. They indicate that *Cave Birds* was commissioned from Hughes by the Ilkley Literature Festival. It was first performed at Ilkley on 30 May 1975, together with *Lumb's Remains*, which Hughes described in the Festival Programme as a piece which "constitutes the Epilogue of a longish piece called *Gaudete*". White records a later performance of *Cave Birds* at Poetry International, the Northcote Theatre, Exeter, and a BBC broadcast produced, like the Ilkley performance, by George Macbeth.

The BBC Radio 3 broadcast which is mentioned took place on 23 June 1975, with Harvey Hall, Frances Horowitz, Peter Mainker and Gary Watson as readers, and with Hughes providing a linking commentary. Several of the Exeter drafts indicate that in performance some poems were divided up between readers for dramatic effect. The events in 'The owl flower' (CB.58), for instance, are described by two different voices reading alternate stanzas.

There are a few discrepancies between the account of the origin of *Cave Birds* given in White's notes, and that given by Keith Sagar in *The Art Of Ted Hughes* (p.234). Of the two, it would seem that Sagar's account is probably the more accurate, since most of the nine Baskin etchings accompanying the poems that Sagar cites as the original group are clearly dated 1973. On the other hand, the poems cited as the originals in White's notes are the ten published by The Scolar Press as a limited edition and, of the Baskin etchings which were published with these, all except one (which is undated) are dated 1974.

White notes that the drafts of *Cave Birds* consist of some 230 quarto sheets, including "108 ink drafts covering every poem". He describes the work as presenting "the various characters and various aspects of the central character in a mystery play whose cast is a company of symbolic birds", and he claims that the drafts reveal "the complete compositional process of this sequence".

Both Sagar and White identify thirty poems in the, major sequence of *Cave Birds* (although Sagar quite rightly treats 'Finale' as a poem, which makes his actual count thirty one). However, drafts of Hughes' own lists of the sequence show that there are, in fact, thirty two poems, plus the 'Goblin' finale. Of these, twenty eight are published in the most widely known, Faber, edition of *Cave Birds*.

Hughes' notes show that he arranged the thirty poems into two different sequences (called 'A' and 'B') which differ from each other and from the Faber sequence only by the exclusion or inclusion of certain poems (see Table 2) none of which affect the alchemical nature of the sequences in any significant way.

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Table 2

This table shows the titles and order of poems in the published edition of Cave Birds (Faber 1978) and in the two lists among the drafts held by Exeter University.

FABER SEQUENCE

EXETER 'A' SEQUECE

EXETER 'B' SEQUENCE

The scream
The summoner
After the first fright
The interrogator
She seemed so considerate
The judge
The plaintiff
In these fading moments
The executioner
The accused
First, the doubtful charts...
The knight
Something was happening
The gatekeeper
A flayed crow...
The baptist
Only a little sleep...
A green mother
As I came, I saw...
A riddle
The scapegoat
After there was nothing...
The guide
His legs ran about...
Walking bare
Bride and groom...
The owl flower

The risen
Finale

The summoner
I was just walking along
The advocate
After the first fright
The interrogator
She seemed so considerate
The judge
Your mother's bones
The plaintiff
In these fading moments...
The executioner
The accused
First, the doubtful charts...
The knight
Something was happening
The gatekeeper
The hall of judgment
The baptist
Only a little sleep...
A loyal mother
As I came I saw...
Incomparable marriage
The culprit
Alter there was nothing...
The guide
His legs ran about...
Walking bare
Bride and groom...
The good angel
The risen

The scream
The summoner
The advocate
The interrogator
Actaeon
The judge
Two dreams in a cell
The plaintiff
I called...
The executioner
Socrates' cock
First, the doubtful charts

The knight
The gatekeeper
A flayed crow
A maze pelican
Green mother
As I came, I saw...
A riddle
The scapegoat culprit
After there was nothing...
The guide
His legs ran about...
Walking bare
Bride and groom...
The owl flower
The risen falcon
Finale

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Remains of Elmet
"The fallen sun..." (ROE.23)

Elmet Cover

The major work which closely followed *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete* in publication was *Remains of Elmet*. It was the third long sequence of Hughes' poems to be published by Faber and Faber between 1977 and 1979 and although Hughes first suggested the Elmet project to Fay Godwin in 1970 and she took some photographs of the area, it was not until 1976 that the book was seriously discussed (Letters 378–80). Only in 1977 did the first of the Elmet poems begin to appear in print¹. It seems likely, therefore, that the whole Elmet sequence was written within this short three year period and subsequent to *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete*.

Certainly, the fruits of Hughes' experience in weaving together several complex themes in a single dramatic and imaginative work could be seen in the balance and unity of this new sequence. The degree to which wholeness and integration were achieved, however, was not only responsible for the favourable public reaction to these poems but also, paradoxically, led even those most aware of Hughes' ideas and intentions to regard the sequence as little more than a remarkably fine collection of his poems. Few were consciously aware of the deeper thematic aspects which effectively demonstrated Hughes' increasing ability to express and implement his beliefs and purposes through

his work. Few, therefore, saw the importance of this sequence in the further development of his poetic endeavours.

Far from being a criticism of *Remains of Elmet*, however, this indicates the great skill with which Hughes was now able to use the tools at his disposal in order to make myth, ritual, music and drama such an integral part of his work that they are almost inseparable from it. No longer, in *Remains of Elmet*, is myth or ritual an easily recognisable framework dictating the basic pattern and momentum of the sequence (as *Alchemy* did in *Cave Birds*); it is as integral to each poem as it is to the whole cycle of the sequence. In addition, the focus of Hughes' attention has moved from the world of imaginative fantasy to our familiar everyday world. In *Remains of Elmet* he delights in the actual, the world of nature, grounding his imagery in the real and the experienced and using his imagination in such a way that we are made aware of our own shortcomings and of the destructive/creative powers (the *mana*) of Nature which surround us. Nature, in this sequence, is no longer a dark, threatening and largely unknown power but an ever present force, the workings of which are constantly visible in our world.

Critical reaction to *Remains of Elmet* when it was published was muted in comparison with the excesses to which some reviewers had been prompted by Hughes' earlier work. Some who were habitually roused to aggression by Hughes' poetry accused him, yet again, of violence and "primal drum-thumping"², but the tone of the *Elmet* sequence was sufficiently different to cause even Hughes' most determined critics to change their complaints. Instead of violence, they accused him of writing poems "neither dynamic nor absolute" but "melodramatic"³; and of being "perverse and inverted to a point of indulgent nastiness" whilst, at the same time, repelling the critic by his "extreme ordinariness of language"⁴.

In general, however, *Remains of Elmet* impressed its reviewers with its power to evoke the bleak, rugged and haunting beauty of the Calder Valley. Fay Godwin's photographs were universally praised, and Hughes' poems were variously described as "the most restrained, beautiful and unobtrusively effective poems"⁵, "his most approachable volume" for a long time⁶; and "Landscape poetry"⁷. Few reviewers regarded the sequence as much more than Hughes' nostalgic reaction to Fay Godwin's photographs. Only one discerned any connecting thread linking the poems, beyond their common concern with the Calder Valley. Even Gifford and Roberts characterise *Remains of Elmet* as "a social history [written] as a natural history", although they did believe that in this book Hughes was "writing at the height of his powers" and they remark on the frequency with which he achieved "complete unity between the vision of the poem and its language" (G/R 239, 249).

Hughes, himself, said in a BBC Radio 3 broadcast that he did not want "to write a history" (BBC 3 May 1980); but, apart from that, he did nothing to expand these views of his *Elmet* sequence, claiming only that Godwin's photographs "moved me to write the accompanying poems" (ROE. Introduction). Similarly, in his note in *Selected Poems 1957-81*, he described the poems as "texts to accompany photographs, by Fay

Godwin, of the Calder Valley and environs in West Yorkshire, where I spent my early years, and where I have lived occasionally since" (SP.238).

True as this may have been, a close examination of the sequence suggests that this is not the whole story; and it is as well to recall Sylvia Plath's warning to her mother not to take Hughes' explanations too seriously. Referring to one of Hughes' early plays she wrote:

He is so critical of the play ... that he needs to invent elaborate disguises as a smokescreen for it (Letters Home 16 Dec. 1960).

More frequently, it seems that Hughes provided a simple explanation for his work which masked its real complexity, exactly as he did in the programme notes for the Ilkley Festival performance of *Cave Birds*.

Remains of Elmet, in fact, is far less simple than Hughes' published statements about it would have us believe. There is a metaphysical aspect to it which has been almost overlooked; and, as in *Cave Birds*, it has a transforming alchemical purpose. It also displays as many congruencies of thought and belief between Hughes and Blake as were evident in *Cave Birds*. It is a sequence not only by virtue of the poems' common geographical location, but also because of a consistent underlying cosmology and because it represents, as reviewer Richard Murphy perceptively realised at the time of its publication, Hughes' attempt to "re-sacralise" the world through poetry⁸.

Murphy, despite the fact that he was not wholly enamoured of the *Elmet* sequence, made several acute observations. Seeing Hughes in the role of prophet and mythmaker, he wrote: "Hughes marshals forces of metaphor, myth and prophecy to reconquer his populous northern territory, and hand it back to nature". Yet, as the *Elmet* poems make clear, Nature would regain her territory without Hughes' help, and Murphy describes the situation more accurately when he writes: "Now the puritan god has died, and the older Celtic deity is recovering her rites of the sun and the moon".

Hughes' poems in *Remains of Elmet* chronicle this process of reclamation, but he also attempted a re-creation of his own; and the shaping influence which he brought to bear in structuring the sequence makes this work Hughes' own very personal account of an apocalyptic vision of the kind which Blake presented in *Jerusalem*.

To recognise this parallel, one needs to be aware of certain philosophical beliefs closely linked to Alchemy which underlie the work of both Blake and Hughes. The clue to these beliefs, and to their importance in *Remains of Elmet*, lies in the continual interaction between light and matter which is evident in the poetry and the photographs throughout the book. This interaction occurs in Hughes' descriptions of the light on the landscape and in Godwin's dramatic black and white photographs. Metaphorically, it occurs, too, in the illumination, feeling and insight which the words and photographs accomplish in the mind of the reader, and in the enclosure of this 'light' in the printed words and photographic images on the page. Just as Blake used his etching processes, "printing in the infernal method by corrosives" to melt "apparent surfaces away" and display "the

infinite which was hid" (MHH 14:13–16), so Hughes and Godwin use the physical and chemical manipulation of light and darkness in the printing and photographic processes to embody their art.

The concept of the immersion of light in matter and its subsequent release is fundamental to Alchemy, where it is the basis of the Great Work. It represents a particular cosmology which was common to Neoplatonic and Hermetic philosophy, both of which were familiar to Blake through a number of sources: Thomas Taylor's translation of an Ancient Greek text by Porphyry on Homer's Cave of the Nymphs; Dr. Everard's translation of Hermes' Divine Pymander; and the alchemical books of Thomas Vaughan⁹, written under his pseudonym, Eugene Philolethes¹⁰. Hughes' familiarity with these ideas may have derived from his knowledge of Blake but it is most likely that he had read these texts and others of a similar nature. His own writing, particularly in articles and reviews, shows a wide knowledge of Hermetic texts as well as of Ancient Greek philosophy and world mythology.

According to Neoplatonic and Hermetic cosmology, primordial chaos contained infinite Light (often called 'Divine Spirit' or 'Soul'); "an infinite darkness in the Abyss or bottomless Depth"; Water; and "a subtle Spirit intelligible in Power" which is called, variously, 'Nimbus Numinis Descenatu', 'Anima Mundi' and 'Nature' (Pymander). Light, attracted by the subtle Spirit (Nature), combined with it and became 'coagulated' matter. So, the sensible world was made and Soul was incorporated in material bodies to create living creatures. Because of these events, infinite Light and Soul became finite and subject to dissolution. With dissolution, however, the Soul is again released, an event of which Vaughan wrote:

Ignorance gave this release the name of Death, but properly it is the Soule's Birth, and a charter that makes for her liberty (V.50).

So, the dialectic of light and darkness began and the cyclical process of the imprisonment and release of divine light (or Soul) was set in motion.

Porphyry's description of the process is more poetic. He writes of the Soul's fall, back into the dark

witch's brew of genesis which truly mixes and brews together the immortal and the mortal, the rational and the emotional, the Olympian and the terrestrial. The souls are bewitched and softened by the pleasures that lead them back again into genesis, and at this point they have special need of great good fortune and self-restraint lest they follow and obey their worst parts and their emotions and take on an accursed and beastly life. (Porphyry.¹⁰).

This world of genesis is our world, the world of Circe, the witchy Moon Goddess, a world dominated by "the cyclical progress and rotation of metempsychosis". It is the Soul's grave, but it is also its cradle (V.50).

In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes uses these concepts and sometimes even Porphyry's exact phrases in his poems, equating the "witch's brew"¹¹ with, amongst other things,

the wild weather which is so common in the “cradle–grave” of the Calder Valley (‘Moors’ (ROE.19) and ‘Where The Mothers’ (ROE.10)). Similarly, the northern setting which Hughes chooses for his poems acquires symbolic significance when related to Porphyry’s statement that “the northern regions belong to the Soul descending into genesis”. Hughes also gives many of the moorland plants and animals a symbolic status which parallels that attributed by Porphyry to Homer. Birds associated with water, such as Hughes’ curlews and snipe, take on the role of the Naiad Nymphs which Porphyry “thought of as the souls coming down into genesis, and hovering over the water” (P.270). The “purple aeons” of heather, which clothe the ‘The Big Animal Of Rock’ (ROE.48;44) in Elmet, resemble the organic “sea–purple cloth” woven by Naiads on the “massive stone looms” which are the “bones” of Earth – cloth which Porphyry equates with “flesh, woven of blood” as a “cloak for the soul around which it is wrapped” (P.29). And the “nectar/ Keen as adder venom” (ROE.48), which attracts the moorland bees of Elmet, finds a Porphyrian parallel in the amphorae of ambrosial honey that attract bee/souls to the “pleasures of descent into the flesh” (P.30-1); for despite their heavenly origin, “the Souls are bewitched and softened by the pleasures that lead them back again to genesis” (P.9–10).

Even the goat which the farmers wait for in the poem ‘Auction’(ROE.107) has a symbolic parallel in Porphyry’s essay: the Zodiacal constellation of Capricorn (the goat) marks the “southern gate” through which Souls “enslaved by genesis, are set free, coming to live again and receiving, as it were, another birth” (P.33–34).

The myths of these early cosmologies are expressed in spiritual terms but they also had great explanatory relevance to the degenerative/regenerative patterns so evident in the physical world of Nature¹². And whilst it is Nature with which Hughes deals most closely in *Remains of Elmet*, the parallels between the myths of the imprisonment of light and soul in matter and his own beliefs in the “luminous spirit” (the divine spirit of Hermetic myth) hidden deep within us, suggest the underlying spiritual aspect of his work (WP.124–5).

In addition, whilst evidence that Hermetic myths have directly influenced Hughes’ handling of *Remains of Elmet* is to be found throughout the sequence, his opening poem, ‘Where The Mothers’ (ROE.10) provides an early and clear example of this. Using rhythms and sounds which capture the wildness of the elements as they are commonly experienced on the pictured moors, Hughes describes the disembodied souls as they, like the wind and the rain, howl through heaven and

Pour down onto earth
Looking for bodies
Of birds, animals, people.

The condition of these souls seeking material rebirth, is linked within the 13 lines of this poem to the fallen condition of our world (which is literally a “star–broken stone”, separated from the sun but totally subject to its power) and to that of Hughes’ own small part of the world, the Calder Valley: it is an unchanging, changing condition of death and rebirth as part of Nature’s cycles, and it is symbolized by the “cradle–grave” throughout

this Elmet sequence.

The blackness which dominates Fay Godwin's photograph, encroaching on the light in which the stone crosses stand, suggests the darkness which the disembodied souls are choosing to re-enter. Their "secret and wild" happiness is that of souls choosing to "follow and obey their worst parts and their emotions" (P.10). For, as Porphyry writes: "The urge for pleasure makes them long for the accustomed way of life in and through the flesh". Thus, these souls may choose the "silent evil joy" of mortal life which, as 'Abel Cross' (the name of the pictured stone crosses) may remind us, led our biblical ancestors to evil.

There are echoes of Nordic myth, too, in Hughes' opening lines where the 'Mothers' "gallop" like Valkyries across the land looking for bodies to re-animate. But 'The Mothers' are also the elements: the alchemical 'Mothers' – Air, Water and Fire – from which, together with the fourth element Earth, all things are created¹³. In the poem, the vivid immediacy of these elements "howling" through the bleak landscape gives the mythical 'witch's brew' of the world of genesis a physical reality. Here, as in other poems in this sequence, the abstract 'elements' of philosophy are materialised as the forces of Nature, in this case the inclement weather – "The witch-brew boiling in the sky-vat" ('Moors' (ROE.19), which so frequently prevails on these West Yorkshire moors.

Hughes' ability to give abstract ideas a concrete form and to present ancient philosophies in a modern context was exercised to its full in the poems of Remains of Elmet. Even the smallest detail of Hughes' landscape is frequently both realistically evoked and of symbolic importance. Just as the first poem captures the harsh wildness of the weather in this region and the sense of exhilaration which it can sometimes bring, so the "lark-song just out of hearing / Hidden in the wind" describes a phenomenon common on these moors where the faint, high song of the lark reaches the listener in wind-blown snatches. This detail suggests an ephemeral joy which tempers the violence of Hughes' scene, but the ground-dwelling lark which soars so high into the heavens to sing is also a suitable symbol by which to link Heaven and Earth, immortal and mortal, just as the lines themselves mark the moment of embodiment in the text of the poem.

The lark is not a common bird in myth or folklore, but it is worth noting that Shakespeare and Blake also made similar symbolic use of this bird. The lark, in Cymbeline, sings "at heaven's gate" ('Song'.2:3); and, for Blake, the lark was "a mighty Angel" (Mil.40:12) which mounts to "a Crystal Gate ... the entrance of the First Heaven" (Mil.39:61–2). Kathleen Raine writes that Blake used the lark as a symbol for the "dimensionless point where eternity flows into time" (Raine.159), a symbolism which is particularly apt for Hughes' poem.

As the opening poem of Remains of Elmet, 'Where the Mothers' establishes the several themes which will be linked throughout the book. The pagan philosophy and mood of the poem, the hints of Nordic mythology, and the reference to the Earth as a

“star–broken stone”, all establish the historical context from which the present day Calder Valley evolved. Here, Hughes re–creates the British Celtic kingdom of Elmet which “For centuries was considered a more or less uninhabitable wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hideout for refugees” (ROE.Introductory Note).

Such was the “cradle–grave” of the Industrial Revolution and of the people who made it possible.

The theme of ‘The Mothers’, too, is established here and is reinforced by Hughes’ dedication of the book to the memory of his own mother, Edith Farrar (who died in 1969) and by his prefatory poem (ROE.7) in which his mother lives on briefly for him through her brother. The recent history of the Calder Valley, the dreams and aspirations of its people – “the arguing immortal dead / The hymns rising past farms” which Hughes records in this book, are her memories and her brother’s: “Archaeology of the mouth” which Hughes has attempted to record before the “frayed, fraying hair–fineness” of the thread linking their lives to his is finally broken. Yet, as has already been suggested, there is more to the theme of ‘The Mothers’ than this. It encompasses, also, the philosophical, alchemical ‘Mothers’ and, most importantly, Nature (the Mother Goddess herself) and the regenerative cycles by which she redresses the errors of humankind and restores universal harmony. The Celtic pre–history of the West Yorkshire, too, is an essential part of this theme, for The Mothers (Matres or Matronea) were an important triad of Celtic fertility goddesses, and Brig (Brigid) the patron goddess of poets, gave her name to the Celtic Brigantian people who once inhabited Elmet.

Closely woven into all these themes, is that of fallen divine Light and its ultimate release, which has already been discussed. In addition to the Hermetic and NeoPlatonic influences, however, there are prophetic and visionary aspects to the Hughes’ handling of this particular theme in Remains of Elmet which strongly resemble those of Blake in The Four Zoas and Jerusalem. Each poet has been greatly influenced by the visions described in the New Testament book of ‘The Revelation of St. John’, but in Remains of Elmet it is as if Hughes has adopted Blake’s symbolism of Albion/England from Jerusalem and given it reality. The rock on which Blake’s Albion lies becomes the enduring rock of the Yorkshire moors; Blake’s “Furnaces” are the fires of the sun; and his “starry Wheels” are the “blind skylines revolving dumbly” (ROE.50) over Elmet. All around, the wind, the rain, the storms and the thunder of the Calder Valley rage as they do in Jerusalem:

Albion cold lays on his Rock: storms and snows beat round him,
Beneath the Furnaces & the starry Wheels & the Immortal Tomb
Howling winds cover him: roaring seas dash furious against him
In the deep darkness broad lightnings glare long thunders roll. (Jer.94:1–4).

The initial fall into generation in the first poem of Remains of Elmet parallels Man’s turning away “down the valleys dark” (Jer.4:22) of Ulro. From then, until the apocalyptic vision in ‘The Angel’ (ROE.124), Hughes’ sequence chronicles the working of Nature’s powers, by means of which the land “Stretches awake, out of Revelations” (‘The Trance Of Light’ (ROE.20), the creatures live and die, and the trapped souls are finally

released.

In Remains of Elmet, as one poem clearly states, "It Is All / Happening to the sun. / The fallen sun" (ROE.23); and the Blake poem which this echoes might well serve to summarise Hughes' healing purpose in this sequence:

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past & Future sees,
Whose ears have heard
The Holy Word
That walk'd among the ancient trees,

Calling the lapsed Soul,
And weeping in the evening dew,
That might controll
The starry pole
And fallen fallen light renew!

"O Earth, O Earth return!
Arise from out the dewy grass;
Night is worn
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more:
Why wilt thou turn away?
The starry floor
The wat'ry shore
Is giv'n thee till the break of day." (Songs of Experience: 'Introduction').

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"The fallen sun..." (ROE.23)

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witch's brew of genesis which truly mixes and brews together the immortal and the mortal, the rational and the emotional, the Olympian and the terrestrial. The souls are bewitched and softened by the pleasures that lead them back again into genesis, and at this point they have special need of great good fortune and self-restraint lest they follow and obey their worst parts and their emotions and take on an accursed and beastly life. (Porphyry.10).

This world of genesis is our world, the world of Circe, the witchy Moon Goddess, a world dominated by "the cyclical progress and rotation of metempsychosis". It is the Soul's grave, but it is also its cradle (V.50).

In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes uses these concepts and sometimes even Porphyry's exact phrases in his poems, equating the "witch's brew"¹¹ with, amongst other things, the wild weather which is so common in the "cradle-grave" of the Calder Valley ('Moors' (ROE.19) and 'Where The Mothers' (ROE.10)). Similarly, the northern setting which Hughes chooses for his poems acquires symbolic significance when related to Porphyry's statement that "the northern regions belong to the Soul descending into genesis". Hughes also gives many of the moorland plants and animals a symbolic status which parallels that attributed by Porphyry to Homer. Birds associated with water, such as Hughes' curlews and snipe, take on the role of the Naiad Nymphs which Porphyry "thought of as the souls coming down into genesis, and hovering over the water" (P.270). The "purple aeons" of heather, which clothe the 'The Big Animal Of Rock' (ROE48;44) in *Elmet*, resemble the organic "sea-purple cloth" woven by Naiads on the "massive stone looms" which are the "bones" of Earth – cloth which Porphyry equates with "flesh, woven of blood" as a "cloak for the soul around which it is wrapped" (P.29). And the "nectar/ Keen as adder venom" (ROE.48), which attracts the moorland bees of *Elmet*, finds a Porphyrian parallel in the amphorae of ambrosial honey that attract bee/souls to the "pleasures of descent into the flesh" (P.30-1); for despite their heavenly origin, "the Souls are bewitched and softened by the pleasures that lead them back again to genesis" (P.9–10).

Even the goat which the farmers wait for in the poem 'Auction'(ROE.107) has a symbolic parallel in Porphyry's essay: the Zodiacal constellation of Capricorn (the goat) marks the "southern gate" through which Souls "enslaved by genesis, are set free, coming to live again and receiving, as it were, another birth" (P.33–34).

The myths of these early cosmologies are expressed in spiritual terms but they also had great explanatory relevance to the degenerative/regenerative patterns so evident in the physical world of Nature¹². And whilst it is Nature with which Hughes deals most closely in *Remains of Elmet*, the parallels between the myths of the imprisonment of light and soul in matter and his own beliefs in the "luminous spirit" (the divine spirit of Hermetic myth) hidden deep within us, suggest the underlying spiritual aspect of his work (WP.124–5).

In addition, whilst evidence that Hermetic myths have directly influenced Hughes'

handling of Remains of Elmet is to be found throughout the sequence, his opening poem, 'Where The Mothers' (ROE.10) provides an early and clear example of this. Using rhythms and sounds which capture the wildness of the elements as they are commonly experienced on the pictured moors, Hughes describes the disembodied souls as they, like the wind and the rain, howl through heaven and

Pour down onto earth
Looking for bodies
Of birds, animals, people.

The condition of these souls seeking material rebirth, is linked within the 13 lines of this poem to the fallen condition of our world (which is literally a "star-broken stone", separated from the sun but totally subject to its power) and to that of Hughes' own small part of the world, the Calder Valley: it is an unchanging, changing condition of death and rebirth as part of Nature's cycles, and it is symbolized by the "cradle-grave" throughout this Elmet sequence.

The blackness which dominates Fay Godwin's photograph, encroaching on the light in which the stone crosses stand, suggests the darkness which the disembodied souls are choosing to re-enter. Their "secret and wild" happiness is that of souls choosing to "follow and obey their worst parts and their emotions" (P.10). For, as Porphyry writes: "The urge for pleasure makes them long for the accustomed way of life in and through the flesh". Thus, these souls may choose the "silent evil joy" of mortal life which, as 'Abel Cross' (the name of the pictured stone crosses) may remind us, led our biblical ancestors to evil.

There are echoes of Nordic myth, too, in Hughes' opening lines where the 'Mothers' "gallop" like Valkyries across the land looking for bodies to re-animate. But 'The Mothers' are also the elements: the alchemical 'Mothers' – Air, Water and Fire – from which, together with the fourth element Earth, all things are created¹³. In the poem, the vivid immediacy of these elements "howling" through the bleak landscape gives the mythical 'witch's brew' of the world of genesis a physical reality. Here, as in other poems in this sequence, the abstract 'elements' of philosophy are materialised as the forces of Nature, in this case the inclement weather – "The witch-brew boiling in the sky-vat" ('Moors' (ROE.19), which so frequently prevails on these West Yorkshire moors.

Hughes' ability to give abstract ideas a concrete form and to present ancient philosophies in a modern context was exercised to its full in the poems of Remains of Elmet. Even the smallest detail of Hughes' landscape is frequently both realistically evoked and of symbolic importance. Just as the first poem captures the harsh wildness of the weather in this region and the sense of exhilaration which it can sometimes bring, so the "lark-song just out of hearing / Hidden in the wind" describes a phenomenon common on these moors where the faint, high song of the lark reaches the listener in wind-blown snatches. This detail suggests an ephemeral joy which tempers the violence of Hughes' scene, but the ground-dwelling lark which soars so high into the heavens to sing is also a suitable symbol by which to link Heaven and Earth, immortal

and mortal, just as the lines themselves mark the moment of embodiment in the text of the poem.

The lark is not a common bird in myth or folklore, but it is worth noting that Shakespeare and Blake also made similar symbolic use of this bird. The lark, in *Cymbeline*, sings “at heaven’s gate” (‘Song’.2:3); and, for Blake, the lark was “a mighty Angel” (Mil.40:12) which mounts to “a Crystal Gate ... the entrance of the First Heaven” (Mil.39:61–2). Kathleen Raine writes that Blake used the lark as a symbol for the “dimensionless point where eternity flows into time” (Raine.159), a symbolism which is particularly apt for Hughes’ poem.

As the opening poem of *Remains of Elmet*, ‘Where the Mothers’ establishes the several themes which will be linked throughout the book. The pagan philosophy and mood of the poem, the hints of Nordic mythology, and the reference to the Earth as a “star–broken stone”, all establish the historical context from which the present day Calder Valley evolved. Here, Hughes re–creates the British Celtic kingdom of Elmet which “For centuries was considered a more or less uninhabitable wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hideout for refugees” (ROE.Introductory Note).

Such was the “cradle–grave” of the Industrial Revolution and of the people who made it possible.

The theme of ‘The Mothers’, too, is established here and is reinforced by Hughes’ dedication of the book to the memory of his own mother, Edith Farrar (who died in 1969) and by his prefatory poem (ROE.7) in which his mother lives on briefly for him through her brother. The recent history of the Calder Valley, the dreams and aspirations of its people – “the arguing immortal dead / The hymns rising past farms” which Hughes records in this book, are her memories and her brother’s: “Archaeology of the mouth” which Hughes has attempted to record before the “frayed, fraying hair–fineness” of the thread linking their lives to his is finally broken. Yet, as has already been suggested, there is more to the theme of ‘The Mothers’ than this. It encompasses, also, the philosophical, alchemical ‘Mothers’ and, most importantly, Nature (the Mother Goddess herself) and the regenerative cycles by which she redresses the errors of humankind and restores universal harmony. The Celtic pre–history of the West Yorkshire, too, is an essential part of this theme, for The Mothers (Matres or Matronea) were an important triad of Celtic fertility goddesses, and Brig (Brigid) the patron goddess of poets, gave her name to the Celtic Brigantian people who once inhabited Elmet.

Closely woven into all these themes, is that of fallen divine Light and its ultimate release, which has already been discussed. In addition to the Hermetic and NeoPlatonic influences, however, there are prophetic and visionary aspects to the Hughes’ handling of this particular theme in *Remains of Elmet* which strongly resemble those of Blake in *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem*. Each poet has been greatly influenced by the visions described in the New Testament book of ‘The Revelation of St. John’, but in *Remains of Elmet* it is as if Hughes has adopted Blake’s symbolism of Albion/England from *Jerusalem* and given it reality. The rock on which Blake’s Albion lies becomes the

enduring rock of the Yorkshire moors; Blake's "Furnaces" are the fires of the sun; and his "starry Wheels" are the "blind skylines revolving dumbly" (ROE.50) over Elmet. All around, the wind, the rain, the storms and the thunder of the Calder Valley rage as they do in Jerusalem:

Albion cold lays on his Rock: storms and snows beat round him,
Beneath the Furnaces & the starry Wheels & the Immortal Tomb
Howling winds cover him: roaring seas dash furious against him
In the deep darkness broad lightnings glare long thunders roll. (Jer.94:1–4).
The initial fall into generation in the first poem of Remains of Elmet parallels Man's turning away "down the valleys dark" (Jer.4:22) of Ulro. From then, until the apocalyptic vision in 'The Angel' (ROE.124), Hughes' sequence chronicles the working of Nature's powers, by means of which the land "Stretches awake, out of Revelations" ('The Trance Of Light' (ROE.20), the creatures live and die, and the trapped souls are finally released.

In Remains of Elmet, as one poem clearly states, "It Is All / Happening to the sun. / The fallen sun" (ROE.23); and the Blake poem which this echoes might well serve to summarise Hughes' healing purpose in this sequence:

Hear the voice of the Bard!
Who Present, Past & Future sees,
Whose ears have heard
The Holy Word
That walk'd among the ancient trees,

Calling the lapsed Soul,
And weeping in the evening dew,
That might controll
The starry pole
And fallen fallen light renew!

"O Earth, O Earth return!
Arise from out the dewy grass;
Night is worn
And the morn
Rises from the slumberous mass.

Turn away no more:
Why wilt thou turn away?
The starry floor
The wat'ry shore
Is giv'n thee till the break of day." (Songs of Experience: 'Introduction').

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Remains of Elmet
"The Mothers..." (ROE.10)

Whilst the first poem in Remains of Elmet introduces the important themes of the sequence, the final poem is, as usual, of special significance and relevance¹.

'The Angel' (ROE.124) describes a dream rather like the one which Hughes told Faas he had "until a few years ago, dreamt at regular intervals since childhood". Faas relates Hughes' poetic interpretations of this recurrent dream to his awareness of the desecration and rejection of 'Mother Nature', and he sees Hughes' poetry as his constant and "deliberate efforts to retrieve her desecrated remnants"².

The dream, which Hughes described to Faas, and also to his son Nicholas and to two German translators of his work (Letters.708,700), usually involved a terrifying vision of a burning aeroplane. Hughes first wrote of it in 'The Casualty' (THCP.42)³, thinking, he said, that if he wrote about it he might stop having it, but "it crept back in various guides". Faas links it to an Epilogue poem in Gaudete in which the dreamed horror becomes "a viper" which falls from the sun; "a radiant goose dropped from a fire-quake heaven"; and "Something dazzling" which crashes "on the hill field" (G.188). The language and imagery of this Epilogue poem link it, too, to the "a swan the size of a city / A slow colossal power" which pounds towards him "in a storm of pouring light" to become the gigantic "white angel" – the "angel made of smoking snow" – of both 'Ballad From a Fairy Tale' in Wodwo (W.166) and 'The Angel' in Remains of Elmet.

In both these poems Hughes describes a vision of a disastrous, fiery event, like "a moon disintegrating" over "Black Halifax"⁴. The swan/angel which emerges from the resulting phosphorescent crater lights the moors as it passes low over them towards him and then disappears "towards the West". It is a "ghostly" and "brilliant" vision, but Hughes' "mother's answer", when he cries out to her for an explanation, turns "the beauty suddenly to horror" and defines the angel for him as an "omen" – a prophetic vision of dark and dreadful future events.

So, horror, beauty and energy are combined in one powerful symbol which is a perfect example of the "horror within the created glory" (WP.89) of Nature. And in the ambiguity of Hughes' lines, the dream 'Mother', to whom he calls out in 'The Angel' but who simply provides an answer in 'Ballad from a Fairy Tale', could equally be his own mother, Edith Farrar Hughes, or Mother Nature. The detail which links Hughes' vision with everyday life, however, and which gave her words "doubled" significance when he was writing these two poems, is his second sighting of the angel's puzzling halo. This "enigmatic

square of satin", which ripples in the wind of the angel's flight, he sees again years later in a square of satin in Sylvia Plath's coffin⁵. There, he "reached out and touched it".

The location of the vision in the area around Hughes' home, his reference to members of his family, and his reluctance to spell out the associated words and events, all suggest its great personal significance. It is very likely that the first version of the poem interprets the vision in the light of Sylvia Plath's death⁶. The angel's disappearance, he wrote, "left my darkness empty". His 'mother's' words were now under his feet, "Joined with earth and engraved in rock", and Sylvia is buried in the hilltop graveyard at Heptonstall. The shock of her death, too, left Hughes, as in the poem, metaphorically "in a valley / Deeper than any dream/... And the valley was dark".

Significantly, perhaps, by the time that *Remains of Elmet* was written, Hughes' mother, Edith Farrar, had also died. She is buried in a grave close by Sylvia's on the Heptonstall hillside, and now, literally, she and her words are 'joined in earth'. These two poems seem, therefore, to link Hughes' vision with both these women who have been of major importance in his life and, since both women were mothers, the poems restate the theme of 'the mothers' which runs through the sequence.

Mother Nature's words are 'engraved in rock' everywhere in *Elmet* and this is reflected in the poems and the photographs throughout *Remains of Elmet*, but there are actual words engraved in rock at this place where Hughes' wife and his mother are buried. Only metaphorically are his mother's words 'under his feet', for on Edith Farrar's tombstone there are only names and dates⁷. On that of Sylvia Plath, however, is carved:

Plath Gravestone

Even amidst Fierce Flames

The golden lotus can be planted.

Such words assert, even in Sylvia's death, the survival of the female life—principle of re-creation and generation which the lotus represents. They can be found in a poem by the Ming Dynasty poet, Wu Ch'eng-en, which is clearly about alchemy and regeneration, (*The Adventures of Monkey* translated by Arthur Waley, Ch.2). And, whether or not these are the words to which Hughes refers in 'The Angel', this final poem in *Remains of Elmet* brings together the human mothers and the Mother Goddess, whose triple aspects of Bride, Mother and Layer-out Hughes has elsewhere described as the different faces of the Angel of Death, who is also the Angel of Life⁸. The mothers and the angel, therefore, are symbolically linked by the powerful life/death force of which they are the instruments.

In interpreting 'The Angel' as an affirmation of the power of Mother Nature's destructive and creative energies on Earth, the transforming and healing influences of Hughes' own work during the years between the writing of the two dream/omen poems must be considered. Of particular importance in interpreting the final stanza of 'The Angel' is a sequence of seventeen poems which were published in a limited edition by The Rainbow Press in November 1979, just seven months after publication of the limited

edition of Remains of Elmet. Adam and the Sacred Nine deals, once again, with the question of human nature, of the search for meaning, and for understanding of our place in the world⁹. It documents Adam's ambitious dreams, his insignificance, his defeat, his visitation by 'sacred' emissaries of Nature, and, ultimately, the beginning of self-knowledge. Its significance here lies not so much in Hughes' exploration of Adam's state, as in his ultimate understanding of it and the means by which he expresses this. Through "The sole of a foot / Pressed to world-rock" (THCP.451-2) (a traditional symbolic route of enlightenment) Adam, reborn from the sacrificial flames of the Phoenix, wakes to the knowledge of his total unity with Nature. Adam, who was made of earth, is also made for earth:

I am no wing
To tread emptiness.
I was made
For You.

Mother Nature, through her birds, has taught him this, and she now affirms her teaching through the rock on which he stands. So, his mother's words, as in 'The Angel', are under his feet.

The importance of this revelation, and the symbolic relevance of 'The Angel' to the whole of the Elmet sequence, lies in the warning which both contain for us: it is a warning of Nature's inevitable resurgence and of the destruction of any society which tries to control and suppress her energies in the way that the Elmet people did. Despite the personal context of Hughes' vision, his message is universal and it is similar in many ways to the visions of others who have foreseen the end of the world.

Hughes' Angel of Death, who is also the Angel of Life, has well known parallels in the Bible books of 'Ezekiel' and 'The Revelation', as well as in the Koran and in Jewish Kabala. Its appearance, like that of Ezekiel's huge and brilliant heavenly messengers, was heralded by a fiery elemental disturbance; and just as Ezekiel's angels "sparkled like the colour of burnished brass", Hughes' angel's massive awesome beauty "was cast in burning metal". It heralded news of destruction and salvation, as does 'the Crier' who appears when "the moon is cleft in two" at the "Hour of Doom" in the Koran¹⁰; and as do the various angels in the 'The Revelation of St John the Divine'.

In both the Bible and the Koran, the forecast destruction precedes the Day of Judgment when "a new heaven and a new earth" will be created¹¹, the imprisoned human Soul will be released, and unbelievers will be "cast into the Fire"¹² Their angels are male, their Heaven and Earth belong to a male god, and it is he who judges, destroys, and promises salvation. Hughes' angel, however, is female and she is associated with all that is symbolically female – the moon and the snow, valleys and moors – and with Earth rather than Heaven. She comes from the dark valley and disappears "Under the moor"; and she promises no resurrection but that achieved through Nature, of which we are all a part. Hughes' conception of the universe is pre-Biblical, he places humanity within the framework of the ancient beliefs on which the Judeic-Graeco-Christian religions were founded and in which the subtle female spirit of Nature predominates. For

him, Mother Nature's energies are part of 'The Infinite': part of a vast, supreme unity which is, at once, everything and nothing. From this 'One', as in Hermetic lore, the physical world emanates, and we are its reflection in miniature.

Yet, our sins and our salvation are in our own provenance. We share in these Universal Energies, and must learn to live in harmony with them; and our guide to this is the divine faculty – the 'luminous spirit' within us. In his essay on 'Myth and Education', Hughes wrote that it is the divine faculty which unites our inner and outer worlds: without this faculty the inner world "is a place of demons" and "the outer world ... a place of meaningless objects and machines"(WP.151); without it "humanity cannot really exist" (WP.149). For Hughes, as for Blake, the divine faculty is imagination "which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit"(WP.149).

Through our imagination, Hughes seeks to teach us that Nature, our creator and destroyer, may also be the instrument of our enlightenment. We are perpetually subject to her powers: and a Culture which misunderstands, suppresses or ignores Nature and regards the Earth as "a heap of raw materials given to Man by God for his exclusive profit and use" becomes, as Hughes wrote in his review of Max Nicholson's book, *The Environmental Revolution* in 1970, "an evolutionary error", because "Nature's obsession, after all, is to survive"¹³. Nature will fight back and attempt to restore the balance; therefore, our only hope is to become aware of our true relationship with Nature and to learn to live in harmony with her.

As well as reflecting the hermetic principle of 'As above so below', Hughes' conception of the world as a single organism, each individual element of which is an essential part of a balanced unity, resembles the Chinese Taoist conception of the Universal Energies as a balance of Yin and Yang. Both resemble the Gaia hypothesis which is fundamental to ecological science and which was first propounded by James Hutton (a contemporary of William Blake) before the Royal Society of Edinburgh in the eighteenth century. It regards the Earth as a living organism which will adapt itself to physical changes in such a way that balance and life is maintained, because, as James Lovelock wrote in his revival of this hypothesis, "living organisms have always, and actively, kept their planet fit for life"¹⁴.

In his imaginative attempts to teach us this, Hughes described one historical period of retribution in his Introduction and Note for *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (Faber 1971). There, he cited the bloody, religious war which took place when Puritanism enforced suppression of the Old Goddess and the old acceptance of the natural energies. He also wrote frequently of our own society as being "exiled from nature"¹⁵ and to this he attributed the world's current ills, execrating "The Scientific Spirit", this "master of ours" which suppresses the instinctive and imaginative energies, and which was

born of the common hunt for the nourishing morsel, nursed by the benign search for objective truth, schooled in the pedagogic idolatry of the objective fact, graduated through old-maid specialised research, losing eyes, ears, smell, taste, touch, nerves

and blood, adapting to the sensibility of electronic gadgets and the argument of numbers, to become a machine of senility, a pseudo-automaton in the House of the Mathematical Absolute. So it ousts humanity from man and he dedicates his life to the laws of the electron in vacuo, a literal self-sacrifice, and soon, by bigotry and the especially rabid evangelism of the inhuman, a literal world-sacrifice, as we all too truly now fear¹⁶.

Having such vehement and long standing beliefs in the destructive power of thwarted Nature, it is understandable that Hughes should have regarded his angelic nightmare/vision as an omen with more than personal significance, and that he should present it to his readers as an apocalyptic vision and a warning for humanity in general.

Hughes, like his friend Baskin, shared Blake's "apocalyptic eye" and a "prophetic concern" for what Blake called "the human form divine"¹⁷. And, just as Blake, in Jerusalem, used London and the cities of England to demonstrate his vision of Man's "passage through/ Eternal Death and the awakening to Eternal Life" (Jer.4:1-2), so, in Remains of Elmet, Hughes used his own small section of England to demonstrate the fulfilment of the angelic portent and to alert us to the danger of our ways. 'The Angel' serves as a coda to the Elmet poems and, by its similarity with other apocalyptic visions, it extends the scope of its prophecy to encompass society as a whole.

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Remains of Elmet

"...at the dead end of a wrong direction" (ROE.103)

Lumb Bank Mills

Between the first and the last poems of Remains of Elmet, Hughes traces the history of a society's war with Nature and the sad misdirection of its energies.

In broad outline, this history is simply told. First, in a euphoric state of co-operation, the "great adventure" of farming the land began: Nature's powers were pressed into service and "The stone rigging" of the 'Hill Walls' (ROE.30) sheeted the hills into place to work for men. The freedom and euphoria, however, were not to last. Fired with energy by their "Brave dreams" (ROE.14), men "conscripted" (ROE.37) and "Tamed", 'Wild Rock' (ROE.40) to create mills where "bodies ... came and went / Stayed in position, fixed like stones" and "became four-cornered, stony" (ROE.37). So began the loss of paradise, innocence and imagination, a process which was completed by the smothering "blackness" of the religion which rose on "Wesley's foundation stone", "blocking the moon" (ROE.82).

As the society's spirit died, "arthritic stasis" (ROE.92) and disintegration set in. The few remaining farmers, resembling their "Rotten and shattered gear", know that it is only a matter of time before Nature resumes her property: they wait (as Hughes' ambiguously puts it) "for a goat to come up" (ROE.107) as if waiting for Pan. Eventually, all that remains of this society are the "lost jawbones of men / And lost fingerbones of women / ... Darkening back to heather"(ROE.117). Light and wind and earth and rock are freed of human constraints and like a "soft animal of peace" from the "pre-dawn" of the world, the land "lies openly sunning / ... Healing and sweetening"(ROE.114).

Hughes' poetic history does not finish here, however, and what follows is more complex. In the aftermath of this society's death comes resurrection. Firstly, the Logos, "The Word That Space Breathes", moves through a world filled with exaltation and promise (ROE.117). Then, as a new dawn breaks over "the valley cauldron", heralded by 'Cock-Crows' (ROE.121), Hughes' dead rise from their graves to become "living feathers", "a family of dark swans", birds sacred to the Goddess and to Apollo, symbols of rebirth and healing unity. Reborn, these spirits "go beating low through storm-silver / Toward the Atlantic" (ROE.122) – flying in the Goddess's silvery light towards the West, the direction associated in Greek and Celtic mythology with Paradise, and the direction also taken by the gigantic angel of Hughes' dreams.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes projects the history of Elmet beyond his own time. The old Calder Valley society was, as Hughes saw it, "virtually dead, and the population of the valleys and the hillsides, so rooted for so long, [was] changing rapidly" (ROE.Intro.). There had been no holocaust and no great natural resurgence, only slow disintegration and decay. The terrifying warning of Hughes' angel/vision had been only partially fulfilled. So, Hughes harnessed the energies to provide a poetic/shamanic resolution to the prophecy and a reconciliation of Mankind with Nature. The spiritual reunion which he described is the natural conclusion to his theme of the elemental and alchemical 'Mothers', and it entails the ultimate release of light and soul from imprisonment in matter, and the return to the natural harmony and peace from which the journey began.

The journey itself, as Hughes' poetic account of it shows, has been long and tortuous, and the imagery of division and war appears constantly in the *Elmet* poems. Often this is linked to the long and turbulent history of England, providing a time scale for the sequence which spans the known existence of people in this region. Such a use of historical perspective is a technique Hughes had employed before to convey the persistence of the natural world and the relative insignificance and brevity of Man's existence in it (as in 'October Dawn' (THCP.37), for example). In *Remains of Elmet*, however, the historical perspective is used more extensively and with greater effect, so that the "guerrilla patience" (ROE.37) of Nature is seen constantly to undermine human endeavours, making Nature the inevitable victor in the struggle for control. Yet, the war is not only between Man and Nature, but also between the people themselves, and between the unreconciled parts of the human personality: the Dionysian and Apollonian energies, the spiritual and the physical needs.

All these conflicts have existed in Elmet since the time of the earliest inhabitants. The “Ancient Briton”, “The Mighty Hunter”, whose energy survives in the tribal memory of the Calder Valley people, like “A whorl in our ignorance” (ROE.84), built hill-forts in this area; and to facilitate worship, defence, contact and trade, people created a network of moorland tracks which later became the stone-paved ‘causeys’ featured in several of Fay Godwin’s photographs 1. Our ancestors also erected the standing stones such as the Bridestones (ROE.65), which remain as impressive evidence of the human struggle to deal with the inexplicable aspects of this world and with instinctive and spiritual needs.

Warfare played an inordinately large part in the lives of the Elmet people, and for centuries this deep, boggy, ditch in the moorlands was a hideout for rebels, robbers and dissenters. The British Celtic people who lived here were the Brigantes, whose fierce, unruly character gave meaning to the modern English word ‘brigand’, and from their time on “Long screams / Dark voices / Swift weapons” (ROE.26) were familiar to the people of this region. Here, were England’s

Badlands where outcast and outlaw

Fortified the hill-knowle’s long outlook (ROE.90).

In the history, legends and myths of the Calder Valley, fighting and death figure large, and continually, it seems,

Wounded champions lurch out of sunset

To gurgle their last gleams into pot holes (ROE.19).

This “Unending bleeding” (ROE.26), and these “lost rivers of men” (ROE.23), contribute to the desolation which imbues the present scene in Remains of Elmet. “Everywhere”, as in ‘Long Screams’ (ROE.26), there are “dead things for monuments of the dead”, like the distant church spire, symbol of a dead religion, glimpsed through the barbed wire in Fay Godwin’s photograph (ROE.27), a composition strongly reminiscent of wartime pictures of waterlogged trenches in Flanders.

In poetry and picture we glimpse the “rummaging of light at the end of the world”, and in this phrase, with characteristic economy and ambivalence, Hughes conveys the enormity and horror of a scene where light both rummages and is rummaged.

Characteristically, too, Hughes’ final image in ‘Long Screams’ links a common local phenomenon with a metaphysical theme, and the curlew, whose plaintive, almost human, cry is heard in the North of England as an omen of death², becomes a messenger between Earth and “the source of it all”, and a symbol of the desolate anguish of the land – the “mother” who created it. (ROE.26).

Evoking memories from his own past in a Radio 3 broadcast, Hughes recalled that “the depression and psychic horror of the first World War crawled around inside everybody like a pestilential secret and there were evil dreams of the war to come”³. And he connected the decay of the Elmet society and its loss of spirit with this war-sickness, seeing “the throb of mills and the crying of lambs”

Like shouting in Flanders
Muffled away
In white curls

And memorial knuckles (ROE.43).

Human warfare, however, is a symptom, not a cause of the failure and disintegration of this society: and the divisions between people reflect a deeper division within them that stems from the alienation between their inner and outer worlds. The slavery of war, the daily slavery to the “sewing machine and shuttle”, the slavish allegiance to religious dogma, all make Hughes’ reference to “a generation of slaves” (ROE.13) particularly apt: all, too, grow from the ambitious pride which dominates the people’s lives and separates them from their natural roots.

In ‘Hardcastle Craggs’ (ROE.13), Hughes develops the images of slavery and war to show the deep disharmony which exists between Mankind and Nature. The “silent valley” of the god, once a “hide-out of elation”, has become an echoing graveyard. Nature, here, like the red squirrel, is at “a branch-end of survival”, and the Taoist quotation with which the poem opens, coming from a system of belief founded on the harmonious balancing of natural energies, emphasises the disorder which prevail⁴. In Taoism, too, the god of the valley is Nature, “the mother of the myriad creatures”⁵, the female principle through which Heaven and Earth are joined:

The spirit of the valley never dies.

This is called the mysterious female.

The gateway of the mysterious female

Is called the root of heaven and earth⁶.

In Elmet, however, disharmony with Nature has been such that the Calder Valley, as Hughes presents it in ‘First Mills’, is like a deserted battlefield on which a brave society has bled to death. It is a sodden, deserted “trench”, covered by a grey dome which the light scarcely penetrates:

A sky like an empty helmet

With a hole in it (ROE.34).

Yet, in the final lines of the poem there is a hope of renewal. Using the extended metaphor of a human life-cycle – the cycle of growth and development, aging, death, and disintegration – Hughes contrasts the brevity of our own existence with the endurance of the Earth, and the death of the Elmet society becomes a small event in the “childhood of the earth”. After the brief period of mourning, the “two minutes silence”, life will continue. Once again, this is a death which presages rebirth: it is a return to the Earth, “the only future” (ROE.14), from which a new beginning may be made. Nature will eventually heal the divisions and the disorder that people have created, and, despite the pervasive imagery of war in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes’ poems convey, also, the endurance and the regenerative power of Nature’s energies.

Paradoxically, the energies expended in human warfare are the very energies which might ensure human survival, and the results of war have not always been completely bad. The Viking invaders, who terrorised the Elmet area in the ninth and tenth centuries,

eventually stayed on as settlers, and Hughes speaks of the mythology and religion of these Norsemen as being part of “our wealth”, part of “our instinct and ancestral memory”⁷. Their influence is still reflected in West Yorkshire place-names and in the “gutturals of dialects” (‘Thistles’ (THCP.147)), and Hughes approves of the addition their Nordic strengths made to the genetic pool when

The longships got this far. Then
Anchored in nose and chin (ROE.90).

It is these strengths which Hughes admired in Billy Holt, a well known, unconventional and fiercely independent personality from the Calder Valley⁸. The wry, gentle humour with which Hughes pokes fun at his taciturn, suspicious, strong-willed fellow Yorkshiremen in the poem ‘For Billy Holt’ (ROE.90), beautifully demonstrates his affection for both him and them.

The Viking influence, however, was only one factor involved in shaping the idiosyncratic character of the local people. Because, in Hughes’ scheme of things, everything is part of an organic whole, he sees the geology and climate of this area as also playing a fundamental role:

The weight of impressive nature has imprinted the people so deeply that they are characteristic – a geological and meteorological phenomena. This helps to explain their obsession with wrapping up well, hot food, keeping warm, cloth and clothing⁹. This comment prefaced Hughes’ reading of ‘Wild Rock’ (ROE.40), a poem in which the people and their ideas and industry grow from the harsh environment and weather, and the wild, beautiful energies of nature are seen to be tamed and formalised, as in a Cranach painting. After the reading, Hughes went on to say

Elmet signifies not just a vaguely featured Nonconformist Celtic locale, but a naturally evolved organism. This showed up commonly in a bedrock, laconic perversity of character.

Such perversity of character has been these people’s weakness as well as their strength, for their determination, courage and independence have become pig-headed, stubborn narrowness. Imagination and spirit, of the kind which produced characters like Billy Holt and which once inspired these people and united them with a common purpose, have gone. Now,

the Calder Valley’s eruption into modern history when it earned such titles as ‘Cradle of the Chartist Movement’, ‘Cradle of the Industrial Revolution’, ‘Cradle of the splitting of the atom’ is ... over. Geology and climate are reclaiming the primeval gorge.

So, with nothing to direct their energies, the children – “children / Of rock and water and a draughty absence / Of everything else” (ROE.38) turn to destruction, smashing and burning and toppling what remains of their parents’ achievements, before trailing away homeward aimlessly “Like the earliest / Homeless Norsemen”(ROE.38).

The destructive loss of spirit which these children personify is shown throughout Remains of Elmet as resulting from humanity’s continual struggle with its inner and

outer worlds. It is a struggle which extends beyond Elmet, for Hughes sees us all as children of Nature who have become victims of our self-made materialistic world, and who turn to aimless destruction as our society crumbles. With the immature egotism of children we have struggled towards material goals, expending, like the people of Elmet, “huge labour”(ROE.14) on the task of bending Nature to our will, only to enslave ourselves in an industrial world which, ultimately, will destroy both itself and us. The title poem of the Elmet sequence describes this self-destruction in an extended metaphor of eating and digestion, and the Calder Valley is seen as a “long gullet” down which the corpse of Elmet vanished. It is a vivid picture of Nature which, like the Celtic goddess, Cerridwen, becomes “the Mourning Mother / Who eats her children” (ROE.44). But the fate of this society, and ours, is self-wrought:

Farms came, stony masticators
Of generations that ate each other
To nothing inside them.

The sunk mill-towns were cemeteries
Digesting utterly
All with whom they swelled (ROE.53).
Finally, when the eating is done, all that is left to mark a society's passing are
“crumbling, loose molars / And empty sockets” – small defacements of Nature's beauty.

So, despite “pioneer hopes” and dreams, the Elmet society reached “the dead end of a wrong direction” (ROE.103). Yet, it was not only the physical struggle with Nature which cramped the spirit, but also an internal struggle of the soul against the strictures of a religious dogma which progressively alienated the people from their spiritual roots. In respect of this religion, too, the struggle was largely self-imposed, since the strict codes of the Nonconformist churches were the choice of the people. Two poems, in particular, show the unhappy consequences of this choice – ‘Bridestones’ and ‘Mount Zion’.

In ‘Bridestones’ (ROE.64), Hughes creates an atmosphere in which closeness to Nature is felt as an integral part of Man's spiritual and religious experience. There are two groups of Bridestones on the Yorkshire moors, both of which are associated with Stone-Age burial practices and with legends of ritual human sacrifice. In Hughes' poem, the stones are the sacred place, the “Holy of Holies”, where the Earth itself is sacrificed in a ritual marriage, her “heart-stuff laid bare” to the “black exclamation mark of rock” which nails her down.

The short lines and frequent caesuras of the first two stanzas of the poem set the scene with a brevity which, along with Hughes' careful choice of words and images, conveys an atmosphere of awe and tension in which “you do nothing casual”. In this setting, the use of the pronoun, ‘you’, makes humanity an integral part of the “congregation” of natural elements, and the permanent effect which this involvement has on us is emphasised by the repetitions of ‘you’ in the last three stanzas of the poem. Having once experienced the numinous through the mystical beauty and terrifying power of Nature, we can never completely ignore it: it is there in the elemental, physical and

cosmic beauty which surrounds us, as if wreathing our shoulders; it is there in the life-governing power of the sun which controls our light and darkness, touching us with the shadow of these stones, just as their presence touches us with shadowy memories of our early ancestors; and it is there in the moonlight which we associate with magic, superstition, and the subconscious, allowing it to penetrate our skulls and rule our imagination just as it rules the Earth's waters.

In the final lines of 'Bridestones', Hughes suggests the symbolism which these stones have for him, representing evidence of an early closeness with Nature that we have lost. Starkly silhouetted by moonlight on the crest of the moors, where they seem to marry sky and earth together, the Bridestones are like a spiritual "perch" (the word exactly indicates the precarious nature of the footing) from which Mankind has since fallen. Through the metaphor of ritual sacrifice in the poem, Hughes hints, also, at the undercurrent of pain and suffering which has accompanied the development of the religious impulse; yet he describes not a human sacrifice, but a sacrifice of Earth, as if it were here that the first false step was taken. "From now on" the sun touches humanity as if fingering our guilt, and "the moon stares into your skull" as if threatening madness.

Strict Nonconformist religions suited the character of the West Yorkshire people, but in choosing them they imprisoned themselves in a system which ultimately denied them the spiritual satisfaction they so badly needed. The "bottomless cry", the deep instinct which drew them towards religion in a search for some lost, primitive fulfilment, was like a memory from childhood – like the call of the Ancient Briton of "nursery school history" whose image perturbed their repressed imaginations. The new beginning and the primitive closeness to Nature which "The Mighty Hunter" symbolises in this poem –

...that waft from the cave

The dawn dew-chilling of emergence,

The hunting grounds untouched all around us(ROE.84)

is the need which originally drew these people towards the church. But, although they still yearned for its satisfaction, still "dug for it" as if for archaeological remains, the instruments with which they chose to dig – the "Iron levers" of Wesley's religion – were the wrong ones. "Labouring" within the confines of a system which distorted their view of the world and denied them imaginative freedom, they could only move further from their goal and "as we dug it waddled and squirmed deeper".

The terrible irony of this situation is summed up in the title of 'Mount Zion' (ROE.82), for this was the Christian symbol (and in particular the symbol adopted by the Nonconformist churches) for the Kingdom of Heaven, signifying the attainment of spiritual union with God. But, as in Blake's Jerusalem, humanity builds religions which are limiting and destructive to the spirit, and

Mount Zion is become a cruel rock & no more dew

Nor rain; no more the spring of the rock appears; but cold

Hard & obdurate are the furrows of the mountain of wine & oil:

The mountain of blessing is itself a curse & an astonishment. (Jer. 79:4–7).

Physically and spiritually, Hughes shows his people as having misdirected their energies. His society, like Blake's "Sleeping Humanity of Albion" (Jer.5:30), has fallen into the state of Ulro – the world of pure matter, error and illusion, "the nether region of the Imagination" (Mil.23:6). In 'The Trance of Light' (ROE.20), using lines which link the natural elements with images of spiritual ecstasy, Hughes writes of the people and the land

That fell asleep

Under the migraine of headscarves and clatter
Of clog–irons and looms
And gutter–water and clog–irons
And clog–irons and biblical texts

The almost total lack of punctuation in this poem conveys the inexorable progression of this fall. Hughes, like Blake, uses War, Industry and Religion to symbolise the forces of oppression. He draws his images from the daily life of the Calder Valley, just as Blake's were drawn from the life he knew in England. Trampled by the clog–irons of the slogging mill workers, who were kept in bondage by the "wage–mirage sparkle of mills" (ROE.70), oppressed by daily labour, and "cowed" by the "hard, foursquare scriptures" (ROE.56), light and spirit soon lay all but eclipsed. And, as the grip of industry and religion hardened, even the smallest sign of spirit was, like the cricket that "rigged up its music / In a crack of Mount Zion wall" (ROE.82), relentlessly opposed.

In the Ulro–like world of matter, error and illusion, which is the materialistic, every–day world depicted in Remains of Elmet, Hughes, like Blake, shows the creative imagination of the people being literally petrified in the walls and chimneys, mills and churches, which they build with self–destructive zeal. These are the physical expression of the immersion of light in matter; symbols of the imprisonment of imagination by materialism, and of the waste of creative energy. Building them,

Spines ... wore into a bowed
Enslavement, the small freedom of raising
Endless memorials to the labour

Buried in them. (ROE.33)

So, the imaginative faculty, the "crystal from space" through which the divine and mystical energies were received¹⁰, "Blackened and fell to pieces" (ROE.118). The divine message, which, like the "song" of a great bird, once drew these people to its source, could no longer be received. 'Mount Zion' with its "terrified", "mesmerised commissariat", replaced the spiritual warmth of the early church; and the religious impulse, like the once great bird, died. Now, there are only crumbling ruins like those of 'Heptonstall Old Church' (ROE.119), and (as in 'Crown Point Pensioners' (ROE.89)) the "yarning", the "indigenous memories", and the "mesmerising music" of the old people singing of "a lost kingdom", to remind us of a former glory.

Sadly, even the few "giddy moments" of glory which people did achieved through their

industry Hughes shows, in 'When Men Got To The Summit' (ROE.56), to be fleeting and flawed. Having reached the pinnacle of their dreams, victory for these men was brief. Neither their spirit, their religion, not the fruits of their industry were proof against Nature's "gentle" but persistent undermining of their position,

Nevertheless, for some giddy moments

A television

Blinked from the wolf's lookout.

As well as being brief, this victory was hollow. In the imagery and rhythm of the final stanza of the poem, Hughes neatly and ironically qualifies the importance of the climactic moments. The phrase, "a television", is given almost exclamatory emphasis by the line divisions which isolate it; and, as a symbol representing society's ultimate achievement, it stands in stark contrast to the "giddy" emotions and the suggested domination of raw energy which is conveyed by Man's capture of the "wolf's lookout". Hughes' view of television as a destructive, emotionless, and energy-sapping product of the "Scientific Spirit", is to be found in an earlier, at that time uncollected, poem, 'TV On' (THCP.192-4). There, he describes it as an "incinerating mouth", a "drumming crematorium" which transforms everything, even his own dreams, into

a cinder substitute

An ashen simulacrum, a fossil of char,

Which was once the only world.

This is our 'simulacrum', our substitute for the real world – a scientific wonder which largely replaces imagination and creativity. If what we see on television represents "the dream of our society", then, Hughes told Egbert Faas in 1971, "we haven't created a society but a hell"¹¹. Television is also a literal and metaphorical example, like photography, of the immersion of light in matter. So, in *Remains of Elmet*, the television which blinked, physically and temporally, from the wolf's lookout, is a powerful symbol of the misdirection of human energies, and an indication of the terribly flawed character of our achievements on our chosen path of materialism and science.

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Remains of Elmet

"...Before these chimneys can flower again / They must fall into the only future, into earth" (ROE.14)

LumbChimney

Imagination, for Hughes as for Blake, is the one thing which may save humanity from

self-destruction. So, in *Remains of Elmet*, he uses his imagination and skill to evoke a world which is both realistic and symbolic; and, through his poetry, he imaginatively engages the reader in the changes which have affected the Calder Valley society and which both demonstrate and symbolise its fallen state. Similarly, he evokes the natural energies which oppose destructive human endeavours and which work to redress the delicate balance that people have disturbed.

In 'Lumb Chimneys' (ROE.14), for example, Hughes' choice of plants, and the similes with which he couples them, realistically suggest the release of Nature's suppressed power in an ecologically and socially disturbed environment. Nettles and brambles, and "depraved" sycamore, are in the van of Nature's army: they are the weeds against which we fight an eternal war in our attempt to control our environment, and they epitomise Nature's fecund power, its capacity for using, "like the cynical old woman in the food-queue", every possible means of survival. So, in 'Lumb Chimneys', "the nettle venoms into place"

The bramble grabs for the air
Like a baby burrowing into the breast.
And the sycamore, cut through at the neck,
Grows five or six heads, depraved with life.
And elsewhere in *Elmet*, "Vandal plumes of willow-herb", that "Mauve-pink flower" which thrives in rubble and destruction, invade "desecrated mounds" (ROE.79,73).

The echoes of a passage from Blake's *Milton*, in which he describes the dance "Around the Wine-presses of Luvah" – the orgy of natural energies which accompanies this "War on Earth" – are very strong:

There is the Nettle that stings with soft down, and there
The indignant Thistle whose bitterness is bred in his milk,
Who feeds on contempt of his neighbour: there all the idle Weeds
That creep around the obscure places shew their various limbs
Naked in all their beauty dancing round the Wine-presses,

But in the Wine-presses the Human grapes sing not nor dance: (Mil.29:8–29)

Both poets imaginatively and symbolically celebrate the supremacy of the natural energies, but, for Hughes, Nature is not so much rejoicing at Man's downfall, as performing a necessary and inevitable revolutionary function: and in the final lines of 'Lumb Chimneys' Hughes shows such a natural revolution to be our "only future". In this poem, society, its spirit and its achievements, fall literally and figuratively "into earth", from which they may "flower again". As in an alchemical synthesis, the people of *Elmet* must undergo death, disintegration and purification in the crucible of Earth before renewal can occur.

The dual capacity of Nature for destruction and recreation – the cycles of death and rebirth – are of central importance in *Remains of Elmet*, as they were in *Cave Birds*,

Gaudete, and most of Hughes' other work. Now, however, they are related more closely and more consistently than ever before to the reality of the natural forces as experienced in a specific location. Earlier poems, such as 'Pennines in April' (THCP.68)¹, 'Mayday on Holderness' (THCP.60) and 'Heptonstall' (THCP.165), presage such illustrative use of Hughes' native landscape. The characteristic release from earthbound naturalistic description into soaring imaginative flight can be found in Hughes' poetry from 'Hawk in the Rain' (THCP.19) onwards, but in *Remains of Elmet* these features are combined in a sustained and deliberate exploration and exploitation of Nature's cycles. Paradoxically, the immediacy and veracity of Hughes' descriptions are such that many readers respond to their forceful reality and miss the unifying symbolism which discloses the hidden presence of the Goddess. Similarly, the nostalgia and empathy the poetry arouses in readers who sorrow for times past, a changing world, and lost loved ones, may blind them to Hughes' deeper purpose.

It is possible, too, that the connection between the finite and the infinite, phenomena and noumena, is now so inseparable in Hughes' own perception of the world that he simply fails to make a clear distinction between them in the *Elmet* poems. Yet, to accept this view would be to ignore the meticulous care with which Hughes habitually constructs his poetry, and his constant striving towards the reunion of our inner and outer worlds. It is more consistent with Hughes' methods, ideas and purpose to regard his vivid realism in *Remains of Elmet* as deliberate: a means by which he seeks to stimulate the readers' imagination, involve them emotionally in this envisioned world and, thereby, create in them an awareness which may awaken them to their own errors and illusions. In the wild landscapes of the *Elmet* poems, Hughes re-creates the encounter between "the elemental things and the living, preferably the human" which he believes stirs up "ancient instincts and feelings" that are "like a blood transfusion to us" (PIM.77–8). Thus, he exposes us to the "Healing and sweetening" (ROE.114) powers which he evokes and uses his poetry as a "biological healing process", in terms of which he once described it².

All this is consistent with the magical/ shamanic/ alchemical potential which Hughes ascribes to poetry; its power to change what is depressing and destructive into something healing and energising; its power, ultimately, to change the reader and the poet, because

Poetry is not made out of thought or casual fancies. It is made out of experiences which change our bodies, and spirits, whether momentarily or for good. (PIM.32)

Through his poetic depictions of the moods of Nature and the force of the elements; by harnessing the transforming power of the unnaturally clear light of the moors which pervades the poems and photographs; and, especially, through his own love for this land and its people, which shines through so many of these poems, Hughes attempts a transformation akin to an alchemical synthesis, by means of which both *Elmet* and the reader may be enlightened and renewed.

Whatever the nature of Hughes' poetic purpose, in *Remains of Elmet* he re-creates a world where, from very early childhood, he was aware of threatening divisions both in

and around him. In *The Rock*, a BBC broadcast, the text of which was published in *The Listener* (19 Sept.1963. pp.421–3), Hughes spoke of the strong shaping influence of his early environment: “The most impressive early companion of my childhood”, he said, “was a dark cliff”. Always aware of this overshadowing presence, he sought escape on the moors around his valley home:

The rock asserted itself, tried to pin you down, policed and gloomed. But you could escape it, climb past it and above it, with some effort. You could not escape the moors. They did not impose themselves; they simply surrounded and waited....

And just as the outlook of a bottle floating upright at sea consists of simple light and dark, the light above, the dark below, the two divided by a clear waterline, so my outlook was ruled by simple light and dark, heaven above and earth below, divided by the undulating line of the moor...

[There] the visible horizon was the magic circle, excluding and enclosing, into which our existence had been conjured, and everything in me seemed to gravitate towards it. Clearly, the division between valley and moor, darkness and light, which is so evident in the *Elmet* sequence, was part of Hughes’ earliest experience. So, too, were other more fundamental divisions, for the moors gave Hughes a different perspective, exposing objects in an “unnaturally clear” (*The Rock*) light and making him aware of another, vaster dimension. The disparity between the world of the moors and life in the valley was such that

From there (the moors) the return home was a descent into the pit, and after each visit I must have returned less and less of myself to the valley. This was where the division of body and soul began.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes generalises this personal experience of a division between body and soul (the division between the exhilarating world of Nature where spirit and imagination are free, and the mundane, pragmatic, materialistic world of the valley) to explain the divisions which he describes in the whole Calder Valley society: divisions which he also attributes to society in general. The parallel, here, with the Porphyrian concept of the immersion of spiritual light in the world of Generation is very strong. Similarly, the impulse which had always driven Hughes towards the moors and Nature (physically and imaginatively) may well be recognised as the struggle of light within him for its own release.

So, Hughes turned to Nature’s healing powers to mend this division. And one of the clearest indications of the way he viewed these powers is found in ‘These Grasses of Light’ (ROE.16), where the four alchemical elements – fire, earth, water and air, embodied in the grass, the stones, the watery light and the wind of our Earth – are seen as the protective “armour” of the metamorphosing human soul.

The sparse clarity of the poem’s lines and images reflects the starkness of the silhouetted trees against the wash of light and darkness in the facing photograph. The small details of the scene, created by the interplay of light and shadow fixed in the

photographic image, are at once the individual elements of the picture and of the pictured scene, as well as “the world” (both real and imaged) which together they create. The “grasses” of light, the “stones” of darkness, the faint suggestion of wind bending the reeds around the lonely seated figure in Fay Godwin’s photograph, are not just isolated elements of some larger group which wait for the imagination to unite them and give them meaning:

Are not

A poor family huddled at a poor gleam

Or words in any phrase

Or wolf-beings in a hungry waiting

Or neighbours in a constellation

They are the essential mother elements of creation from which the world is formed; the seemingly trivial “*bric-à-brac*” on which we must rely for our survival; small intimations of a universal power far greater than our imagination can encompass. Like the phenomena of Nature which, for Blake, were the “Children of Los”, these, too, are

the Visions of Eternity;

But we see only, as it were, the hem of their garments

When with our vegetable eyes we view these wondrous Visions. (Mil.28:10v12).

Through imagination we may glimpse the infinite, although we see only the finite details of the natural world: so, small details make up a picture or a poem which may stimulate our imagination and stir our emotions, thus uniting our inner and outer worlds.

The photograph which accompanies ‘These Grasses of Light’ and ‘Open to Huge Light’ has considerable emotional impact, and this is enhanced by Hughes’ images, which suggest the near extinction of the light by darkness, and which fill the emptiness with the “music” of desolation; but ‘These Grasses of Light’ requires a rational rather than an emotional response to appreciate the complexity of its layered meanings.

Such rational complexity is common in Hughes’ poetry. But, in *Remains of Elmet*, poems where the intricacies of meaning hold sway are balanced by others in which the emotions predominate, so that again Hughes is seen to be working towards integration and wholeness.

Balance is aimed for, too, in the positioning of the poems, so that the exhilarating and the numinous qualities of Nature counteract the sadness and despair aroused by Hughes’ pictures of a disintegrating society. This particular kind of balance was discussed by Hughes in reference to his *Moortown Elegies*, published in a limited edition a few months before *Remains of Elmet*. In a taped reading of some of those poems Hughes talked of the emotional impact of poetry and of his

superstition that the writer, even more than the reader, is affected by the mood and the final resolution of his poem in a final way. [For] In each poem, the writer to some extent finds and fixes an image of his own imagination at that moment. But if a poem concludes in a downbeat mood his imagination is to some degree fixed and confirmed in that mood. In the ordinary way his imagination would heal itself – move on to new moods, but the poem stands there, permanent, vivid and powerful and tries to make him continue to live in its image³.

To combat this 'downbeat' effect, Hughes deliberately set out to write poems "whose whole accent" is upbeat. So, in the Elmet sequence, a particularly downbeat poem like 'Remains of Elmet' (ROE.53) is followed by one full of exhilaration, movement and hope – 'There come Days to The Hills' (ROE.54). In this poem, as our perspective changes from the dark valley to the freedom of the moors, nature is metaphorically freed from the ugly remains of Man's endeavours and the whole mood lightens. The next poem in the sequence, 'Dead Farms, Dead Leaves' (ROE.55), continues the change of perspective by placing the world (like the World Tree of mythology, which the imagery of the first two stanzas suggest) in a cosmic framework: dead farms and leaves "cling to the long / Branch of the world;" and

Stars sway the tree
Whose roots
Tighten on an atom.

Within this broader framework, the birds, "the cattle of heaven", move symbolically and with magical ease between known and unknown worlds as they

Visit

And vanish.

Like the birds and animals in Hughes' earlier poetry, those in Remains of Elmet are symbols of natural energy. They are common, realistically portrayed denizens of the Calder Valley landscape, but they are, also, imaginative keys with which Hughes, like Blake, attempts to unlock our "single vision" and open our senses to the "immense world of delight" (MHH.7E:4) in and around us. He uses them to draw us imaginatively into the elemental realm of the Goddess, but their appearances in this poetic sequence are few, and their role as shamanic guides or emissaries of the spiritual world is not of central importance, as it was in Cave Birds. Instead, they provide links with the Universal Energies, channelling imaginative life and beauty into the sequence at times when it is most necessary, or evincing the continuing existence of such energies in the midst of desolation and decay.

Sometimes the animals are victims of the decay, enduring, like the sheep, enforced participation in human endeavours. Yet, although the "few crazed sheep" (ROE.30) that survive the 'shipwreck' of this society are bedraggled, maggot-ridden, wormy and 'The Sluttiest Sheep In England' (ROE.104), still their eyes reflect the powerful energies of Nature from within and around them. The elemental "witch-brew boiling in the sky-vat" of the moors "Spins electric terrors / In the eyes of sheep" (ROE.19), and the gaze of "their demonic agates" can, like that of the "square-pupilled yellow-eyed", "black devil"

goat in the early poem 'Meeting' (THCP.35), stir the imagination, disturb our equanimity, and remind us of our true insignificance in the vast compass of the Universal Energies.

In 'The Sluttiest Sheep in England', these bedraggled angelic "beggars" sent by the "god-of-what-nobody-wants", the god of "This lightning-broken huddle of summits" which is our Earth, remind us of our ancestry as they

clatter

Over worthless moraines, tossing

Their ancient Briton draggles-tassel sheepskins

Or pose, in the rain-smoke, like warriors –

They serve, like Hughes' tramps, to demonstrate the primitive strengths we have lost through our war with Nature.

The role of the sheep as the Earth-god's angels, and the pervasive imagery describing their watching 'demonic' eyes, suggests the presence of some great implacable power which, through them, observes our steady progress towards self-destruction, biding its time before appearing. A possible resolution to this waiting is given in the next poem in the sequence, 'Auction' (ROE.107), where Hughes shows a society so alienated from nature that even the farmers are as "rotten and shattered" as their possessions. In such a society there can be little hope. Yet, with "Wind pressing the whole scene towards ice", they wait for a goat – the symbol of nature's fertile energies; the form of Pan, the son of Hermes/Mercury and the god of shepherds; and the one creature which might survive in this barren land and bring new life to the area. The ambiguity of the final line of the poem allows for the awaited emergence of Pan from the Underworld ' Pan

whom Nietzsche, first in the depths, mistook for Dionysus, the vital, somewhat terrible spirit of natural life, which is new in every second⁴.

At the same time, Hughes' final line describes a realistic auction situation.

Unlike the sheep, the birds in Remains of Elmet rarely share the lives of men. Because they are not earthbound, but move with ease between Heaven and Earth, Hughes consistently uses them to link the physical with the metaphysical. He chooses birds which are common on the Yorkshire moors, and which have folkloric connections with the spiritual world as well as mythological significance. In particular, Hughes' curlews and snipe play significant roles in returning the fertility of the Goddess to a plundered and ravaged Earth, and punctuating the dark atmosphere of the poetic sequence with shafts of light and beauty.

Following a series of poems in which Hughes describes the entrapment, enfeeblement and degradation of energy and spirit in warfare and materialism, come the two poems, 'Curlews in April' (ROE.28) and 'Curlews Lift' (ROE.29), in both of which the natural beauty of the world predominates.

CurlewThe first of these poems takes up the final, grievous, image of 'Long Screams' (ROE.6), and the cry of the curlew, the "moist voice" in which Hughes once identified

the “peculiar sad desolate spirit” of the moors (The Rock), becomes magical harping over the misty valley. The curlew’s strange nocturnal cries have led to widespread folkloric associations of it with Gabriel Hounds and the souls of the dead⁵, but it is also a fertility symbol. In Hughes’ poems, both these aspects of his “wet-footed god of horizons” are present. In April, the month of springtime and renewal, its “wobbling water-call” conjures the moon: “new moons sink into the heather” and rise from it “full golden” and bulging. The sexual connotations are implicit and are reinforced by the procreative connotations, luxurious sound and active tense of “bulge” (the word is also emphasised by its typographical separation from “full golden moons”). This, together with the impression of temporal contiguity, which is given by coupling the two events in linked lines, suggests the magical fecundity of the moon, which rises from the Earth radiant with the promise of new life.

In the second poem, the curlews are associated not only with the Goddess through the poem’s imagery, but also with the “nameless and naked” energies themselves. Like a human soul leaving its earthly body, they “slough off” the Goddess’s “maternal”, earthy environment and lift skywards. away from the “magic circle” of the moorland horizons which Hughes once saw as a “high definite hurdle” blocking physical and mental escape from the valley (The Rock). They are spirits of light and water which, like the nymphs in Porphyry’s essay *On the Cave of the Nymphs*⁶, enact the soul’s perpetual cycle of descent and return between temporal and eternal worlds.

In the freedom of air, the poetry imitates the rhythms and pattern of the birds’ flight as, with their sinewy bodies, their voices and their “trembling bills”, they connect the elements – earth, air, water and light: lifting out of earth, negotiating air with masterly skill, they lance the water with their voices to release the light trapped beneath this “skin”. The ultimate result is the release into their world, and ours, of something inspiring awe, or ecstasy, or both: something which nourishes the soul.

Snipe Another common moorland bird used by Hughes to invoke the fecund power of the Goddess is the snipe. In mythology and folklore, snipe, because of the aerial drumming noise they make, are Rain-birds or Thunder-birds, attributed with the magical power of rain-making and, consequently, linked with fertility gods. In *Remains of Elmet*, on the open moors, “snipe work late” whilst the fleeing wraiths from Mankind’s history perform in ghostly drama all around them (ROE.19). The purpose of their work becomes apparent in ‘Spring-Dusk’ (ROE.66), where Hughes uses their energy to re-connect Heaven and Earth. Their drumming becomes the invocation of supernatural powers by a “witchdoctor” or shaman, whose flight draws down the moon to a wounded and dying Earth to promote new life. The imagery likens them to doctors swiftly suturing a body’s wounds, and their healing, in this poem, is magical, fertile and beautiful.

In this poem, too, Hughes, the shaman/witchdoctor/poet, makes an invocation of his own which brings soothing and healing energies to the sequence. The poem revolves around the witchdoctor’s “drumming in the high dark” in theme, atmosphere and form, moving from a frail, broken state, through an urgent, rhythmic, circular “stitching”, to a soothing gentle balance which culminates in the unity and promise of “eggs”.

'Spring–Dusk' comes in the middle section of the Elmet sequence and completes a group of poems dealing with the elements. Its healing, fertile power is necessary to balance those fierce and destructive energies which scour and purify the land, preparing it for a new beginning. The poems from 'High Sea Light' to 'Spring–Dusk' lift us from the dark valley into the freedom of the moors. There, Hughes explores the interplay of earth, water, light, air and a few moorland animals in terms of energy and action, and the motifs of worship and sacrifice, which run through these poems, culminate in moonlit healing and the promise of new life.

Light, which early in the sequence was represented as "The fallen sun" (ROE.23) held by suffering "worn–out" water, becomes, in 'High Sea–Light' (ROE.62), glowing and pearly. On the moors, the sun and water which share the exhausting lives of the men and women of the valley become free and energetic. The streams absorb heaven's glow with eager "gulping mouths", and the light energises the "busy dark atoms" of an Earth which Hughes links with the sun in his final image. Here, Earth is both a "stone of light" and "wreathed" by that light; an image similar to that used in 'Walking bare' (CB.54), where the protagonist is described as a planetary "spark" swept by the sun's corolla.

The contrast is seen, too, in the accompanying photographs, and is most marked if the photograph following 'It Is All' (ROE.23) is included in the comparison. In the picture opposite this poem, light glows softly from alley paving stones, but it is surrounded by darkness, trapped in the polluted water of the clog–worn gully, and blocked by the blackness into which the path leads. Similarly, the photographs on page 24 show a disk of light reflected in dark turbid water, looking very like a sun trapped beneath the water's surface. In contrast with these, the picture above 'High Sea–Light' (ROE.62) shows a stone causeway glowing with a light which becomes soft and pearly where it robes the gentle curves of the open moors beyond. We see a pathway of light leading to the freedom of the lit moors; a path by which to escape into the "lark–rapture silence". Light and soul, which are trapped in the valley, are here released from human constraints and can work with the other elemental energies to revive the damaged Earth.

The Earth, in this small group of poems, is a living organism, its body a "prone, horizon–long / Limb–jumble of near–female" (ROE.63) energised by the light, scoured by wind, and oppressed by the "shadowy violence" (ROE.50) of the skies. In 'Where The Millstones of Sky' (ROE.66), Hughes captures the peculiar weight of grey Yorkshire skies which seem to rotate above the Earth like a millstone, altering the colours of the landscape and making light and shadow "purple–fine". The wind and rain which such skies portend do, indeed, grind away the Earth's surface "skin", to expose the "raw true darkness" of the soil, which seeps like blood from the wound.

Trees, like the one in 'A Tree', are "stripped" of leaves and tortured by the elements into contorted and cruciform shapes. Few survive, and generally the land is naked but for grass and the few tiny plants, such as harebell and heather. These flowers bring seasonal colour and life to the scene, covering the "huge bones and space–weathered

hide” of the living Earth with “blueish delicate milk” (ROE.114), and clothing it in “sea–purple” Tyrian hues, as if with the cloth woven by the Naiads in the Porphyry’s essay on The Cave of the Nymphs. The “euphoria” associated in the poem with the flowers connects them, like the moorland animals, with the life energies which endure and multiply:

Heather
The upper millstone heaven
Grinds the heather’s face hard and small.
Heather only toughens.

And out of a mica sterility
That nobody else wants
Thickens a nectar
Keen as adder venom (ROE.48).

Euphoria is generated, too, by this nectar, which is a portion of the universal energies, an ambrosia which attracts the bees and which thereby performs its essential role in the interconnected patterns of natural life. As in “the moony shades and hills” of Blake’s Beulah

...the Flowers put forth thier precious Odours
And none can tell how from so small a centre, comes such sweets
Forgetting that within that Centre Eternity expands
Its ever during doors (Mil. 34:47–49).

Porphyry, too, connects nectar with intoxication, quoting Greek myths and rituals, and explaining its “relationship to purification, to prevention of decay and to the pleasure of descent into the flesh” for souls, “whom the ancients specifically call bees” and who are also priestesses of Demeter, the Goddess⁷. Such conjoined good and bad qualities are conveyed in ‘Heather’ (ROE.48) by Hughes’ description of the nectar as “keen as adder venom”.

Where it is not clothed with harebells and heather, the living body of Earth is scoured by the elements. and Hughes envisages its silent, almost barren, expanses as an “agony of numbness” in which the infrequent, watery sun appears like a nurse who “swabs and dabs” the bleeding wounds (ROE.66). The essence of this metaphor is “the idea of nature as a single organism” which, Hughes once wrote, was “man’s first great thought, the basic intuition of most primitive theologies”⁹. His use of it here, however, is Platonic and Alchemical in its linking of Earth with the divine and in its cleansing purpose. In the words of alchemist. Thomas Vaughan,

the texture of the universe clearly discovers its animation. The Earth ... represents the Grosse, carnal parts. The Element of Water answers to the blood ... The Aire is the outward refreshing spirit, where this vast creature breathes, though invisibly¹ .
And the alchemical cleansing and healing power of the sun’s celestial fire is, as in Cave Birds, the means of Earth’s purification.

Despite this cleansing, the world of the moors and world of the valley are still separate. Men on the moors experience the elemental freedom, regaining, as in 'Football at Slack' (ROE.68) and 'Sunstruck' (ROE.70), some of their childhood energy and playfulness. But they are out of their depth in this elemental world, and unable to escape the pull of the valley.

In 'Football at Slack', (ROE.68) despite the atmosphere of jollity and the merry plunging, bouncing, spouting, bobbing and flying of men and ball (which share movement and action as if connected by invisible strings), the press of the weather pervades the poem. We see the men tread water whilst the "winds from fiery holes in heaven", the mad "glare light", and "the steel press" of rain, loom over the playing fields and the valleys and "a golden holocaust" lifts "the cloud's edge to watch them". Here, and in 'Sunstruck', the dialectics of light and darkness, freedom and imprisonment, temporal and eternal, and of man's inner and outer worlds, are joined in poems which are full of humour and playfulness but which convey, also, the ominous power of the sun.

The "bunting colours" of the "merry-coloured" men on the football field, and the image of cricketers "stampeding / Through the sudden hole in Saturday" (ROE.70), give the impression of a brief holiday from the routine of the working week. That this routine is of stultifying "misery" is most apparent in 'Sunstruck', where each escape and return of the ball parallels the players' urge to escape, and the inevitability and disappointment of recapture. Even at play on the cricket pitch the men's bodies remain Earthbound, confined within the "cage of wickets", physically "cornered", "pinned" and "chained": only their hopes and dreams fly with the ball, but are "caught and flung back, and caught, and again caught".

In the paradigm of a cricket game, the complete escape of the ball is impossible: in our material world, complete escape for the spirit is impossible. 'Caught' and 'bounced', and 'clubbed' into submission by the circumstance of our lives, our defeated spirits submit and our eyes turn from the seemingly impossible vision to the dregs and crumbs within our reach, just as the cricketers' eyes

glad of anything, dropped
From the bails
Into the bottom of a teacup,
To sandwich crusts for the canal cygnets.

Yet, the urge to escape the imprisoning pattern of the abstract "theorem" of our routine existence, the urge to return to the Source and make contact with the natural energies which once fuelled our childhood play, persists, and so the cycle is repeated. As in the football and cricket games of these men, the exhilarating experience of flight, although momentary or vicarious, changes us so that we return from it "like men returning from a far journey", exhausted but refreshed. In this repeated experience lies hope, and so, in his poems and in the structure of the sequence itself, Hughes repeatedly draws us, in imaginative flight, from the dark and stultifying atmosphere of the valley.

If the poems from 'High Sea-Light' to 'Spring-Dusk' depict the power of the elemental

energies to heal the Earth, then 'Football at Slack' and 'Sunstruck', although light and humorous in part, demonstrate the feebleness of Man's own efforts to free himself from darkness.

In both poems the men are dwarfed by the land and the weather. The footballers, precariously exposed on a "bareback of hill" between "plunging valleys", are awed by the piled "hills darkening around them". On the sodden slopes they defy the weather which threatens to wash them back into the "gulf of treetops" and the "foundering" world of the valleys. Commenting on the poems, Hughes said: "On Hebden ridge(?) between two steep sided valleys was a football field, precariously balanced. From my bedroom window I could watch the play. These verses describe the scene on what memory produces as a typical day"¹⁰.

The cricketers, too, are limited in their play by the "shaggy valley parapets / Pending like thunder", which can be seen overshadowing their homes in Fay Godwin's accompanying photograph. They are "burned" by the sun which dazzles and nags at them, inducing a kind of hallucinatory madness as it did in the early poem 'Sunstroke' (THCP.86) and in Hughes' story, 'The Harvesting' (W.82-92). "Sunstruck", their "brains sewn into the ball's hide", they identify with the ball and imagine the impossible release – "The ball slammed flat! And the bat in flinders! The heart soaring!", and the "wild" affirmation of their hopes of freedom. In their sun-induced hallucinatory dream they believe they can escape the dark valley. But their imagination stretches only as far as the flight of the ball in their unimaginative games, and neither spirit nor body is able to withstand exposure to the sunlight for long. Driven by a "cross-eyed, mid-stump, sun-descending headache", they turn in relief to the "cool sheets and the black slot of home", despite the slavery and negation which these entail.

The lack of imagination and spiritual strength which precipitate this return to the valley are not, however, due to an innate deficiency in Mankind but result from a lack of maturity. Certain aspects of the poems convey this: such as the uninhibited, childlike energy which the men bring to their games, and their careless disregard of the prevailing weather. The narrator's birds-eye perspective, too, reduces the men to toy-like figures whose slightly ludicrous actions, orchestrated by their "elastic" connections with the ball, remind one of a child's game in which all the pieces are joined together by strings hidden beneath a board¹¹. As in Blake's poem,

Such were the joys
When we all, girls & boys,
In our youth-time were seen
On the Ecchoing Green¹².

The spiritual immaturity of Mankind has been suggested throughout the Elmet sequence by the egocentricity and foolishness of the peoples' aims and actions. It was symbolized in the aimless children of 'Mill Ruins' (ROE.38), and it is clearly stated towards the end of the sequence in 'Tick Tock Tick Tock' (ROE.120) where, in an extended metaphor based on J.M. Barrie's story of Peter Pan (the 'ageless boy' from Never Never Land) the fate of the Calder Valley is attributed to the "everlasting play" of a whole society.

Because of its immaturity, Mankind is, like the football and cricket players of Hughes' poems, trapped by its own limitations. For as long as we seek the sun, our situation is not without hope. But because of our divided state and our single vision, our spirit – the divine spark within us – has grown weak. Like Blake's sleepers in Ulro, we need to be awakened, taught the error of our ways, and shown the path of enlightenment. Otherwise, we have no choice but to keep returning to the dark "valley cauldron" (ROE.121) until the "golden holocaust" finally occurs.

Throughout the Elmet sequence, Hughes prepares for the final apocalyptic event which was prefigured in his dream/vision of the Angel. By the agency of the elemental energies and, in particular, through the cleansing power of celestial fire, he works towards the golden holocaust in which light will be released from the valleys and the fallen souls released from the generative world so that, as in the The Revelation of St. John the Divine, "a new heaven and a new earth may be established"¹³.

Time, in the sequence and in the poems, is not wholly linear. It makes inter-related spherical patterns, circling back on itself so that the early days of this society are meshed with later events, and figures from the past are invoked in modern settings. Its movement at times resembles Yeats' spiralling Gyres, but it is also that of Nature whose revolutions are continuous and endless. So, the fall of the people and their society into Earth occurs many times and is interwoven with the exposure of everything to the elements, and with the repeated return of the spirit to the moors, as "it does what it can to save itself alone" (ROE.14).

This repetition and intermeshing of themes and events produces an impression of formlessness, such as was found by some early critics in Blake's Jerusalem. Yet, this formlessness is apparent only if one expects events to be described chronologically, which in Jerusalem and Remains of Elmet they are not. Paley, commenting on Jerusalem adopts the word 'synchronic' to describe the way that Blake, like Ezekiel and John in the prophetic books of The Bible, describes a single event in a number of different ways¹⁴. Remains of Elmet resembles all these writings in its 'synchronic' form and in its apocalyptic theme, and there are other parallels in the way Hughes' apocalyptic vision is expressed.

The most obvious of these parallels is, of course, the angelic vision which has already been discussed, but the cyclic recurrence of destruction and death in Hughes' poems is like the repeated devastation wrought by the various angels in Revelation. The great elemental disturbances of the biblical visions, the "peals of thunder and sounds and flashes of lightning" (Revelation.4:5), find parallels in the Calder Valley weather which "Spins electrical terrors / In the eyes of sheep" (ROE.19). And the poisoning of the Earth's waters occurs just as surely through modern industrial pollution, which has created the "veto of the poisonous Calder" (ROE.70). In each case, the vision is of war and death and "unending bleeding", like the "rummaging of light / At the end of the world" (ROE.26). And the smoke darkened skies of the Calder Valley provide us with a realistic foretaste of the "bottomless pit" where:

there arose a smoke out of the pit, as smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit (Revelation.9:1).

Clearly, however, Hughes does not use Christian symbols in their usual biblical form. He transposes them into modern settings, embeds them in nature, and creates his own myths around them, relying on the resonant connotative power of words like 'Egypt' and 'slavery' (in 'Willow-Herb' (ROE.73), for example) to conjure the biblical myths into the mind of the reader. Similarly, underlying Hughes' vision of devastation, there is the promise of a natural, rather than a Christian, resurrection. 'Willow-Herb', with its reference to "Egyptian walls"; to something that was "Slavery and religious"; and to the "Rusts" and the stagnation of the canal, suggests close parallels with "the cauldron whose rust is therein" of Ezekiel's vision (Ezekiel.24:6-14). Embedded in the poem, however, is the almost hidden symbol of a serpent which has biblical, natural and cosmogonic significance.

Willow-Herb The serpent, toothless but dangerous, good and evil, is present in the alliteration and sibilance of 's' throughout 'Willow-Herb'. The "ripples" of its "slack", "gleam-black" body form the slow-moving serpentine canal which we see in Godwin's photograph, and, in the final line of the poem, its ambiguous smile is symbolised in the Willow-Herb – the first weed to arrive when there is disturbed ground, and a common weed amongst city rubble where its "vandal plumes" mark the beginning of natural regeneration. In the circularity of the poem, where the title is integral and important to the text, so that Hughes starts and ends with Willow-Herb, we see the cosmic serpent – the Uroborus – symbol of eternity and regeneration.

Characteristically, Hughes' use of the Willow-Herb plant in this poem is both realistic and symbolically precise. Through its name, the plant is linked with the prophetic and divinatory Willow Tree of the Moon Goddess. It is also commonly known as 'fireweed'¹⁵, and its appearance in this poem presages the moment in 'Under the World's Wild Rims' (ROE.79) when, for the first time in the Elmet sequence, the sun's fire enters the "submarine twilight" of the valley, falling as sunbeams into the moon-crescent "horns" of Willow-Herb flowers, and thus symbolically joining sun and moon, Heaven and Earth, body and soul. That Hughes' imagery is alchemical as well as natural is clear, and this is supported by the fact that although the mention of horned flowers suitably continues Hughes' metaphor of vandal invaders, the description (contrary to Hughes' usual practice) is not botanically accurate: it is, however, consistent with alchemical symbolism, where the crescent moon is a symbol for the receptive Soul¹⁶, the vessel in which the synthesis occurs.

Celestial Dew

Hughes' use of Christian, biblical, mythological and natural symbolism is especially apparent in his treatment of Earth's rocky substrate in *Remains of Elmet*. The biblical symbolism of rock as the Lord (e.g. Psalm 18) and as the tomb/womb from which Christ was resurrected, is an important part of Hughes' prophetic message, but its Christian framework is submerged in the diverse myths which Hughes, here, weaves around it.

The ancients, as Porphyry noted, used rock to symbolise the first matter, dark, infinite and without form (Porphyry.24). From this matter the world was made, and "from the presence and supervening ornament of form ... it is beautiful and pleasant¹⁷.

In Elmet, Nature and Mankind impress changing form on the rock's surface: "Heather and bog—cotton fit themselves" (ROE.50) to it, softening and ornamenting it with a "grizzly bear—dark pelt" (ROE.48); Nature seasonally transforms it; and Man quarries and carts it, shaping it into mills and houses and walls. Yet, although Hughes makes use of this ancient philosophical concept of matter and form, throughout the Elmet sequence he personifies the rock.

The natural, physical changes in the 'Big Animal Of Rock' (ROE.44) which Hughes creates, reflect the changes that take place in the Calder Valley: and the animal's song serves as a metaphor for the immutable soul which is the essence of its mutable bodily form. In its association with Man, rock is "Tamed" (ROE.40), loses its spirit, forgets "Its earth—song" and is "Content / To be cut, to be carted / And fixed in its new place" (ROE.37). In this state it becomes "soul—grinding sandstone" (ROE.40), sharing the dispiriting world of the people, and imposing as well as receiving "four—cornered, stony" (ROE.37) spirit and form. From the "Roof—of—the—world—ridge" in 'Wild Rock' (ROE.40), the millstone—grit, which is the prevailing geological rock of the Calder Valley, now overlooks the smoking pit of the valley where sheep fleeces are "blown like blown flames". The quarried rock—face becomes an ironic "Heaven" (ROE.40), coloured and tainted by its proximity to the valley. "Oak—leaves of hammered copper, as in Cranach" are beautiful but fixed, as in one of Cranach's religious paintings of Adam and Eve at the moment of temptation in the Garden of Eden¹⁸. And, just as the rhythmic and typographical balance of the first three lines of the poem contrasts wild rock with tamed rock, and natural millstone—grit with a 'soul—grinding' sandstone, Fay Godwin's photographs on pages 40 and 41 depict Heaven and Hell, showing the contrast between them. From the dark, looming, wild rock—face of the quarry in Godwin's photograph on page 41, one of Heaven's "angels" (ROE.104) (looking like a Paschal Lamb) stares down into the fixed order of the valley on page 40, where mill chimneys symbolise slavery and where – in "rain and rain... and rain", "Wind" and "Cold" ... the people and the land tremble under a haze of smoke.

Away from the valley, however, the 'Big Animal Of Rock' is "In its homeland" (ROE.44). Crouched on the moors, like the dark rock in Godwin's photograph (ROE.45), it is the foundation stone of the natural world: Mother to "root and leaf"; "kin" to the animals and birds, bodies and souls, of the generative world who "visit each other in heaven and earth". In the metaphor of worship, which pervades this poem, the rock is the "cantor", the precentor who leads the spiritual song at this "Festival of Unending", this festival of the Goddess of Life and Death who, like the hag Cerridwen, "eats her children"¹⁹. From the cantor/rock comes the sacred music which connects the multifarious changes around it to a single spiritual theme; and the world of Elmet, Hughes' poetic world which is also our world, is the church in which it officiates. Its songs punctuate the poetry, stopping whilst other rituals take place, but always returning to lead the worship until the final "Hallelujah!" in 'The Word That Space Breathes' (ROE.117) announces "The

Messiah / Of opened rock”.

Early in the Elmet sequence this ‘Big Animal of Rock’ kneels singing amongst the stone ruins which are the “cemetery of its ancestors”. Through “lasting purple aeons” (ROE.48) the wind “curries” its heathery, grassy pelt; and, as the sequence progresses, people come and go, and are “ground into fineness of light” (ROE.50) by the revolving skylines where the millstone–grit of Earth (Hughes puns on the geological name) and the “upper millstone heaven” (ROE.48) touch. The traces of human life are ground away; the elements cleanse the land; and, at last, the “swift glooms of purple”, mingling skylines and heather, wind, water, earth and light, swab “the human shape from the freed stones” (ROE.103).

As this purification of Earth progresses, the land becomes bare and wintry, as if the awaited “star–drift / Of the returning ice” (ROE.48) approaches. Dramatic changes begin to occur. The magic circle of hills is broken, their “fragments” drift apart (ROE.92) and the Goddess (in the disembodied semblance of the Wolf–goddess, Cerridwen), “That cannot any longer on all these hills / Find her pelt”, vents her wrath on the world, rolling it in rain “Like a stone inside surf” (ROE.95) whilst the elements from her “cauldron of thunder” (ROE.100) crash, splinter and claw the closed doors and the closed minds of those who suppress and exclude her. At last, the “howling skylines” (ROE.103) close in, the stones are “freed”, and, with the beggar/angels watching from the “lightning–broken huddle of summits” (ROE.104), the wind presses everything “towards ice” (ROE.107)20.

In the photographs on page 108 and 109 we see the star–drift / snow–drift ice–age begin. The change from empty moorland, ridged by the horizontal plough–lines of ancient and primitive farms, to the broken walls and fences leading into a snow covered landscape which fades away to nothing in the distance, marks the completion of one more cycle. In the loss of definition towards which the eye is led in the second photograph, the world returns to elemental chaos; to matter in which form can no longer be distinguished; to a wintry white drift of nothingness.

The two poems which immediately follow these photographs dwell on this nothingness. ‘Widdop’ (ROE.110) is at a first reading one of the least satisfactory poems in the Elmet sequence, because of certain internal ambiguities. The mood of the poem is unclear, but that it is about nothing and nothingness is apparent from the repetition of these words within the poem. There is negativity in the imagery – the lake is “frightened”, the wind “trembling” and the grass “in fear”. There is artificiality, too: Widdop Reservoir does not have the natural “happiness” of “broken water at the bottom of a precipice” (ROE.13), it has been “put” there by “someone”, and the trees around it blindly “act” a pretence of reality. Yet the “stony shoulders” of the earth “broaden to support” the lake as if accepting it; the “trembling” of the cosmic wind may be due to fear or awe; and the gull, a heavenly visitor associated with the souls of seamen and travellers and with ploughed fields and fertility, “blows through” the veil of clouds out of the cosmic nothingness into the nothingness of this scene, and may be viewed with hope or despair, or perhaps both.

In the form of the poem, the end–stopped stanzas physically and rhythmically isolate the various components of the scene from each other. Disjointed and repeated phrases reflect a discontinuity in the natural harmony of the place described, but there is, also, a suggestion of tentative acceptance – the earth supports the lake, the wind sniffs at it, the trees combine to give it reality, and the “heath–grass” creeps close.

Ultimately, the poem circles back to its beginning so that the lake, like the gull, has only a fleeting presence, coming through “a rip in the fabric” of time and space, “out of nothingness into nothingness”. This, perhaps, is the import of the poem: its nothingness creating a pause in the spiritual music, a stillness in the cycle of regeneration which is like Eliot’s “moment in and out of time”²¹.

If ‘Widdop’ creates a pause, a disjunction in the sequence, then in the next poem, ‘Light Falls Through Itself’ (ROE.113), movement and harmony are re–born. In the photograph of snow which accompanies the poem, the crystalline whiteness of snow reflects and transmits the light which falls on it, so that light literally falls through itself creating an almost formless chaos of light. Similarly, in the photographic process, the light falling on the molecules of photographic emulsion has been trapped so that the resulting image is almost totally of whiteness and light.

From this elemental chaos of light, Hughes creates an alchemical metaphor of rebirth. The snowy whiteness resembles the crystalline spiritual purity achieved in ‘Walking bare’ in *Cave Birds* (CB.54), but here it is transformed by the reality of the Calder Valley. Like a purified soul, stripped of “most of itself and all its possessions”, light falls “naked” into the poor stripped earth of Elmet where, in the central images of the poem, warmth and life are breathed into it. The “poor cow”, whilst being a realistic part of the poverty stricken landscape, nevertheless embodies the maternal, succouring qualities of the Mother Goddess; and the wind fanned flames trembling at the blue crucible–edge of the far skylines, fuel the transmutation. So, the pale, “threadbare”, winter light of the sun kindles life in the windswept snowscape: light is reborn from light, and it “creeps” and “cries” and “shivers”, like a baby, in the grass.

With the re–birth of light, the ice–age of winter passes and, fuelled by the strengthening sun, Nature’s resurgence begins. The spirit, too, revives. ‘In April’(ROE.114), the time of spring and renewal, the “black stones” which have survived the “pre–dawn” chaos of the Earth emerge, as if “from under the glacier”, to lie “Healing and sweetening” in the sun. Hughes’ image of a soft, shaggy, cat–like creature, stretched ecstatically in the sunshine, beautifully captures the mood of a warm spring day when the land is newly softened by vegetation and looks fresh and peaceful; and the image re–introduces Hughes’ earlier metaphor of the rock–animal, the cantor, which now emerges to lead the Messianic singing. At the same time, this “soft animal of peace” symbolically parallels the biblical “covenant of peace” (Ezekiel.37:26) made by the Lord with the people of Israel after their resurrection in the valley of bones; and its emergence can be equated with the appearance of the Lamb in Revelation (14:1–3), which is accompanied by the music of deliverance.

Now, the music of the cantor–rock is heard again, leading the elemental choir in Hughes' own music of deliverance. In 'The Word That Space Breathes' (ROE.117), drawing on the great choral tradition of the North of England, in which Handel's Messiah is widely known and well–loved, Hughes creates a Messiah of his own. Handel's oratorio celebrates the birth, Passion, death and resurrection of Christ; and the 'Hallelujah Chorus', which is perhaps the best known part of the work, glorifies Christ risen from his sepulchre of rock. Hughes, too, celebrates "The Messiah / Of opened rock", but his song owes more to the ancient sacrificial rituals associated with Nature's cycles of death and rebirth, than to the Christian celebration which replaced them²².

The parallels with the prophetic books of The Bible, however, are strong. The Word, the promise of Man's redemption, which is to be heard at the resurrection, is here, as in Ezekiel's vision, the breath of the wind blowing through the "tumbled walls" (ROE.117) of the land and breathing life into the scattered bones of the people (Ezekiel.37:9–10). And, as in the Revelation, this disembodied voice is accompanied by the music of the people, the land and the skies, a beautiful, sad echo of the singing once heard in the valleys but, nevertheless, a 'Song of Deliverance',

as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth (Revelation.19:6–7).

In Hughes' poem, the walls which the people so painstakingly built, the enclosures into which their lives and cares went 'Like manure' (ROE 33), guide the spiritual wind–song (as the eye is guided by them in Fay Godwin's photograph), leading it upwards "From every step of the slopes" to a crest where clouds and walls meet. As if in a musical crescendo, "The huge music / Of sight–lines" is gathered into a dramatic focus which joins Heaven and Earth, and this climax is echoed in the final stanza of Hughes' poem like an 'Hallelujah!', marking the moment when the Word and The Messiah become One and the circle of the poem is complete.

In many ways, it is a pity that 'Heptonstall Old Church' (ROE.118) and 'Tick Tock Tick Tock' (ROE.120) intervene between 'The Word That Space Breathes' and the next poem describing apocalyptic events, which is 'Cock–Crows' (ROE.121). The first of these poems reiterates the fallen state of Elmet, the literal and metaphorical extinction of light in the valleys, and the freeing of the land as "The valleys went out" and "The moorland broke loose".

Such reiteration is consistent with the pattern of cyclic recurrence which has prevailed throughout the sequence, and it reflects the synchronic form of the biblical prophecies, but it also dissipates the elated mood established by the previous poem and breaks the momentum. The second poem, 'Tick Tock Tick Tock', begins to re–establish this momentum, and together the two poems act like the restatement of a musical theme in the approach to a grand finale. As such, they should increase, rather than dissipate, the tension and build towards a greater climactic release. It is doubtful whether these two poems actually achieve this.

'Tick Tock Tick Tock', however, concerns Hughes' own prophetic role in the sequence of events and is part of the group of poems dealing with his childhood which will be discussed separately. The theme of time which dominates this poem, and the way in which Hughes' unique perception of impending danger is encapsulated, appropriately link it to the coming events.

The last three poems of *Remains of Elmet* are the climax of the sequence. Each one of them is part of Hughes' visionary prophecy of transformation, and part of the poetic alchemy by means of which the trapped light will be freed from the valley, the souls released, and, as in Revelation (21:1), "a new heaven and a new earth" is created.

The title of 'Cock-Crows' (ROE.121), which is the only place in which the word 'cockcrows' is hyphenated, provides the first hint of the poem's underlying theme of the renewal of Earth. By hyphenating the two words Hughes not only suggests an initial imperative bird-call from which the chorus grows, but also makes mythological allusions. As in *Cave Birds*, the cock is a common symbol of unenlightened Man, it is also the symbol of the reborn solar hero and of Hermes Mercury, the guide of souls. Here, it is separated from, but linked to the crows, thus connecting the bird of dawn, which is also a symbol of the fool, with the bird of darkness, which is also the oracle bird of the sun&gods. Thus, in a single hyphenated word, Hughes embeds the complex idea of the consubstantiality of opposites which allows change and renewal.

Hughes vision in 'Cock-Crows' has many precedents. The prophet Ezekiel, set by God "upon a very high mountain" (Ezekiel.40:2), saw the holy temple of his people of Israel and, like the rising sun, "the glory of the God of Israel came from the way of the east ... and the earth shined with his glory" (Ezekiel.43:2). John, too, in Revelation, "saw heaven opened" (Revelation.19:17) and "an angel standing in the sun" (Revelation.21:10): he, too, was carried "away in the spirit to a great and high mountain" from which he was shown the new Jerusalem of "pure gold" (Revelation.10:19).

The imagery of mountain tops, sunrise, gold and splendour, is common to these biblical visions, as it is to that of 'Cock-Crows' and to the final part of Blake's *Jerusalem*. Hughes' vision, however, owes more to Blake than to any other visionary prophet, and his opening lines echo those of Blake's poem addressed 'To the Christians' which begins:

I stood among my valleys of the south
And saw a flame of fire, even as a Wheel
Of fire surrounding all the heavens: (Jer.77:43-45).

These lines precede Chapter 4 of *Jerusalem* in which the awakening of Albion and Jerusalem takes place, and the vision described by Blake is one of natural oppression and disaster akin to Hughes' vision in 'Ballad from a Fairy Tale' (THCP.171) (which also echoes these lines) and 'The Angel' (ROE.124). In 'Cock-Crows', however, Hughes has left the valley to stand on "a dark summit, among dark summits". As elsewhere in *Remains of Elmet*, these moorland summits become like wave-crests²³ and, in the "Tidal dawn splitting heaven from earth" (the phrase suggests the appearance of a new

world as well as a new day), Hughes envisions the parting of the dark primeval chaos of the waters to reveal, like the parting valves of a rough grey oyster, the living colour and beauty within. His imagery, here and throughout the poem, fills the imagination with the light, colour and sound of Cerridwen's cauldron which, like an alchemical crucible, ferments a fiery mixture that briefly allows us to "taste-gold".

The dawn which Hughes sees and hears is a magical awakening of the dark valley of Elmet. Equivalent events occur in Blake's Jerusalem at the awakening of Albion, who rose from his rock like the sun with

the wrath of God, breaking bright, flaming on all sides around
His awful limbs: into the Heavens he walked, clothed in flames,
Loud thund'ring, with broad flashes of flaming lightning & pillars Of fire, (Jer.95:6-9)
Blake's etching shows Albion (who is also Los and the sun) rising from the rock-strewn earth, naked, and phoenix-like in flames²⁴, just as in Hughes' poem the "fire-crests / Of the cocks" (symbols of the sun and a new dawn) rise from the dying valley of Elmet.

Although Hughes' imagery is quite different to Blake's and is founded in the reality of a Calder Valley sunrise, the parallels are clearly present. Just as, for Hughes, the cockcrows kindled "under the mist" before "clambering up the sky", so Blake's sun/Albion is seen "in heavy clouds / Struggling to rise, above the Mountains" (Jer. 95:11). Hughes' "sickle" cockcrows, "tossed clear" of the valley mist and "soaring harder, brighter, higher", until they burst "to light / Brightening the undercloud", are like Albion's "arrows of flaming gold" (Jer.95:13), which flew forth into the heavens from his "horned Bow" (Jer.98:3) until "the dim Chaos brighten'd beneath, above, around" (Jer.98:14). The bubbling "valley cauldron" resembles the "Furnaces of affliction" (Jer.96:35) which, in Albion's vision, became "Fountains of Living Waters" (Jer.96:36) out of which "The Sons & Daughters of Albion" (Jer.96:39) rose from their sleep. And the rhythm and diction at the central climax of Hughes' poem echo those of Blake in their exultant, expanding, glorious power.

From the first hint of life and colour, as the "tidal dawn" begins to separate the dark Heaven from the dark Earth, the rhythm and momentum of the poem reflect the gradual awakening of the valley. The cockcrows kindle first, like a new fire, "deep" under the mist, "sleepy" and "bubbling". Then, in a couplet full of soft sibilance, a caesura stops the "tossed clear", escaping sound; and, by a paradoxical coupling of words, the "rocket" becomes a "soft" glow falling back into the mist with the dying fall of the second line. So, the form reflects the content, and continues to do so as, in the next stanza, the sound, movement and colour build to a crescendo. The harshness and forcefulness of words like 'soaring', 'tearing', 'bursting', 'challenge', 'hooking', are softened by the imagery of rounded "bubble-glistenings", bringing light and beauty to the dark "undercloud", and by the warmth of the redcombed "fire-crests of the cocks" and the melting echoes of their crowing 'hanging smouldering from the night's fringes'. Now, the world is lit by the internal fires of the cauldron, bringing an end to the dark valley night, and now the brimming molten sound becomes "A magical soft mixture boiling over,/ Spilling and sparkling into other valleys."

So, the climactic rhythms of the 4th stanza precede the spreading of light and beauty over the Earth; and its repetitions, mood and rhythms resemble strongly those of Blake's vision of Albion as he cries

Awake, Awake Jerusalem! O lovely Emanation of Albion,
Awake and overspread all Nations as in Ancient Time;
For lo! the Night of Death is past and the Eternal Day
Appears upon our Hills. Awake Jerusalem, and come away! (Jer.97:1–4).
Hughes' vision, however, is different to Blake's. The light that he creates in the dark valleys of Elmet is an effusion of the "magical soft mixture" that bubbles in the Earth Goddess's cauldron; and the whole process, with its bubbling mixture, its molten and metallic glistenings, its pervasive mists, and its bursts of light and sound, is one in which the alchemical Mothers – Fire, Water and Air – are intimately involved.

Slowly, Hughes' vision, like the visions of the holy city seen by Ezekiel and John, fades. The fiery cockcrows, "lobbed-up" like "horse-shoes" of glowing metal from the man-made world of "sheds" and "hen-cotes" and "farms" in "other valleys", fade and die away, "Sinking back mistily"(the phrase applies equally to the cockcrows and the sheds, hen-cotes and farms from which they come) until the last "spark" of life has died.

Hughes' "golden holocaust" (ROE.68) is over. As the fiery "embers" pale, the Earth is left like a cooling crucible of volcanic lava, "dark rims hardening", lifeless and smoking. So, all that is left at the end of the poem are sun, water and air – the alchemical 'Mothers' – and the formless rock of the Earth. The cycle has been completed. The tidal dawn, heralded by cockcrows, has become the dawn of "a new heaven and a new earth"(Revelation.21:1), and, as the sun climbs into the "wet sack" of the Earth's atmosphere, Heaven and Earth are reunited and the "day's work" of re-creation is begun.

In the vision of 'Cock-Crows', Hughes sees the fires of the Earth released and the Earth wholly cleansed. Now, in the wake of this golden holocaust, the souls trapped in the world of generation are freed. In 'Heptonstall Cemetery' (ROE.122), however, unlike the biblical visions of the apocalypse, Hughes sees no judgment of the dead, no sorting of the sinners from the saved. The risen souls are those of his family and his people – the people of Elmet.

Once again, in the rhythms, theme and content of 'Heptonstall Cemetery' there are echoes of Blake's Jerusalem, for "Thomas and Walter and Edith", "Esther and Sylvia"²⁵ are like Blake's "Urizen & Luvah & Tharmas & Urthona", and "The Sons & Daughters of Albion ... Waking from Sleep" (Jer.96:39&41). Similarly, the great radiant glow of sunlight in Fay Godwin's photograph could well illustrate this same moment of awakening in Jerusalem, when "all around remote the Heavens burnt with flaming fires" (Jer.96:40). Again, however, Hughes' imagery is different and unique, and the elemental energies which fill the poem are both symbolic and real. The opening lines of the poem recall similar sea/storm imagery in Hughes' early poem 'Wind' (THCP.36), where the

disturbances of a stormy night are also linked by a biblical reference with Christ's promise of salvation²⁶. SwansIn the Elmet poem, the whole Earth is in motion, and under the wind and "spray" the moors become one "giant beating wing" in which the risen souls are "living feathers". In the cauldron of the elements Man and Nature are united as a single creature and, as the spiritual wind – the divine breath of resurrection – blows across the land, "all the horizons lift wings", becoming a "dark family of swans" flying towards the Western Paradise (the Atlantic is west of the Calder Valley) which is also the Celtic Otherworld. 27.

Hughes' swans, unlike the pure white swans of Aphrodite and Apollo, are "dark", and it is appropriate that the newborn, newly fledged, souls should resemble cygnets. Most importantly, however, as birds of the Sun God and the Goddess, they are symbols of unity which heal the divisions between Heaven and Earth, Man and Nature, the corporeal and the spiritual. So, harmony is restored and a new beginning can be made. Hughes, in this penultimate poem of the sequence, makes a powerful return to the origin, and this, too, is the final vision of Blake's Jerusalem:

All Human Forms identified, even Tree, Metal, Earth & Stone, all
Human forms identified, living going forth & returning wearied
Into the Planetary lives of Years, Months, Days & Hours; reposing,
And then Awaking into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality (Jer.99:1–4).
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Remains of Elmet
"I swallowed an alarm clock" (ROE.120)

Mytholmroyd Canal

One further important aspect of Remains of Elmet has yet to be examined, and that is Hughes' own participation in the sequence. Not only did he create the imaginative rituals of the poetry and manipulate the energies so as to effect healing and re-integration, but he specifically included himself in this process. In so doing, Hughes deliberately subjected himself to the energies and to the ritual of re-integration which he attempted. Figuratively and psychologically he returned to his formative years and re-lived the events and situations to which he was exposed, thus facilitating a healing catharsis.

In Remains of Elmet, for the first time since 'Wodwo' (THCP.183), Hughes also publicly and very personally examined the question 'What am I?'. Up to this time, he had dealt with this problem in the general terms of its meaning for Mankind, and his adoption of

the role of poet/shaman for our society had been mostly implicit. Only with the Cave Birds sequence did he state any kind of deliberate reforming intention, and even then it was couched in the indirect metaphorical form of the re-education of Socrates. In Remains of Elmet, however, Hughes examined, as Wodwo did, “roots / roots roots roots” (THCP.183) and, in the process of clarifying his feeling of being unique and different – his feeling that “I seem to have been given the freedom / of this place” – he made explicit his prophetic-visionary purpose. In this sequence, it is Hughes who finds his “Paradise” in the polluted Canal waters (ROE.74); Hughes for whom the leaping fish is “A seed / Of the wild god now flowering for me” (ROE.77); and Hughes whose flung stones allow the sunbeams to enter the “submarine twilight” of the valley (ROE.79). As in the visionary works of Blake, Ezekiel and John, he describes ‘The Call’ and the visions which have led him to write this prophetic, visionary sequence of poems.

Many of the concerns expressed in ‘Wodwo’ reappear in those Elmet poems which deal directly with Hughes’ own experiences, but the questing, tentative nature of the creature is gone. Now, Hughes knows his place in the world, knows his “shape”, and has found his identity. He no longer questions his compulsion to explore the natural world in his poetry; for, so to speak, “turning leaves over”, inspecting the “secret interior” of frogs, and for “picking bits of bark off this rotten stump”. He has discovered why “me and doing that have coincided very queerly” (THCP.183). The reflection of the real world which he sees when he enters the subconscious water-world of his imagination is still “very clear”, but he no longer hangs suspended “in mid-air” as did the wodwo. In the interval of years between writing ‘Wodwo’ and the Elmet sequence, and, in particular, by working through the carefully controlled rituals of Cave Birds, Hughes had learned the art of shamanic flight.

He had learned to fly to the source in order to return with “something badly needed, a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community’s affairs” (UU.206). He had learned, too, the skill of using poems like primitive song, which he had once described as “power-charms, tools and practical agents in the business of gaining desired ends” (WP.34).

Most importantly, he achieved something he once described as essential for poetic development, the ability to move

inwards into imagination and beyond that into spirit, using perhaps no more external material than before and maybe even less, but deepening it and making it operate in the many different inner dimensions until it opens up perhaps the religious or holy basis of the whole thing UU.204).

For Hughes, as for Wodwo, it was the attraction of water which drew him into the other-world of the imagination and the subconscious energies – the water which in Hughes’ home valley was present as the polluted Calder and the stagnant “gleam-black”, serpentine Canal. The traditional world-wide mythological and folkloric association of rivers and serpents with natural life-forces and with the spirit world, makes these polluted waters of the Calder Valley potentially symbolic. But Hughes’ use of this symbolism is characteristically founded in an imaginative evocation of reality which

is given visual support by Fay Godwin's photographs on pages 72–78 that show the mirror-like surface of the water and the “upside down” (THCP.183) world of Hughes and his world very clearly.

Since childhood, Hughes' imagination had drawn him, like Alice, through the “heavy mirror”(ROE.76) of the water's surface into another, magical world – the “Drowning Black” (ROE.74) underworld of the canal. There, Nature's life-energies flourish as they have since life began, breeding strange monsters – loach like “wild leopards – among bleached-depth fungus” (ROE.74) – in a “Paradise” through which, it seems, Hughes began his journey from innocence to experience.

‘The Canal's Drowning Black’ (ROE.74) re-creates the powerful sense of other-worldness and fascination which Hughes felt as a schoolboy when he “teetered on the slime-brink” of the canal “peeping” into the depths. Through his description of the “Torpide, ginger-bearded, secretive” loach, he conveys the slow, silent, ageless homogeneity of the drowned world. He sees the tiny watching eyes of the fish, and their anemone-beards fowering “all down the sunken cliff”; and he sees how their slow, snake-like movements flow with the water. By contrast, the boy's world is harsh, ugly and sick,

Blackened with the acid rain fall-out
From Manchester's rotten lung.

And it is overshadowed, literally and metaphorically, by the “deadfall” (ROE.82) of the Methodist church. With a Blake-like reversal of values, this Christian edifice is seen, like a figure in a Black Mass, as a “cowled, Satanic Majesty” which oversees Hughes' disastrous, childish attempt to bring some of this underwater life into his own dying world in “a two pound jam-jar”. But the “paled new moons” of the fish, which should, symbolically, have heralded new growth and fertility in the child's world, “failed”; and as Hughes lobs the dead fish back into the canal he throws each of them “high through the air” as if desperately attempting to hang them in his own world's sky.

Underlying this vivid childhood scene, the suggestion of temptation in Paradise and the subsequent fall from innocence is very strong. The boy teeters on the slippery edge of the canal, fascinated by his own god-like power to make the fishy anemone-beards flower with the stamp of his foot. He is fascinated too, by the eyes which make him the centre of attention by watching his every move; and by the conflict between his knowledge and his imagination, which makes the sinuous creatures in the black depths below him seem “Five inches huge!”. Eventually, overcome by his desires, he succumbs to temptation and uses his superior power and knowledge to coax these primitive creatures into his home-made, “kitchen curtain”, net, and, so, into his world. There is, however, no sense of sin involved. The child's actions are linked in the poem's imagery with the naive, mischievous tricks of the Chinese Monkey-god¹, and the death of the fish serves to demonstrate to him the enormous difficulty of trying to move between the two worlds. These fish, too, with their “little cupid mouths”, are emissaries of the Goddess, sent, like Cupid himself, to teach the child the power of desire, the foolishness of pride, and the need for patience and control. The final ritual of tossing the “pouting,

failed, paled new moons” of the loach “one by one / Back into their Paradise and mine”, suggests Hughes’ acknowledgment of the Goddess’s power and his wry acceptance of this lesson.

Whatever Hughes learned from this childhood experience, his belief that fish and their watery world connected him directly with the realm of Nature, and with his own subconscious energies, remained very strong. And, just as the cupid-lipped loach in ‘The Canal’s Drowning Black’ aroused his desire, so the first large trout that he ever saw had special meaning for him. ‘The Long Tunnel Ceiling’ (ROE.76) describes this first encounter; and, introducing the poem in a BBC Home Service, Schools, broadcast on June 16, 1965, Hughes spoke of the Trout as “the authentic aboriginal in that polluted valley” of the Calder, and “the holiest creature out there in its free unspoiled sacred world”. Explaining these views, he said:

I was too young to capture small ones in hillside streams so trout came to have magical meaning for me which I never managed to get over. Consequently, the trout which leapt so suddenly into his dark “cavern of air and water” under the busy canal bridge seemed god-like and sacred – “An ingot! / Holy of holies! A treasure!” – a “seed of the wild god now flowering” just for him.

Erupting from the black mirror-world of the “dark loach” into Hughes’ noisy “cavern of air and water” beneath the main road, this great trout briefly shattered the interface between Hughes’ real and imaginary worlds, just as it broke the circle made by the bridge arch and its reflection. The poem’s imagery captures the cataclysmic breaking and re-making of Hughes’ trembling tunnel; and the strange confusions which occur with reflections, so that the canal waters appear “cradled” in the imaged ceiling and a rising trout appears as a falling brick. It captures, too, the careless beauty of the great fish, a “free lord” of these two worlds; and the shock, amazement and awe of the boy, whose imagination is fired with visions of the trout’s moorland home and the “shake-up of heaven and the hills” which has brought this “tigerish, dark, breathing lily” to him.

Ultimately, in the poem, the trout becomes a symbol of Nature’s universal energies, which Hughes sees waiting, almost hidden, “between the tyres, under the tortured axles” of the industrial world of Elmet, to redress the disturbed natural balance; a warning of the power which the “wild god” has, to bring the structures of this world crashing down like a collapsing bridge; an intimation of the coming apocalypse which the boy thought “at last ... had started”. Above all, for Hughes, the trout represents a creature which has the ability to move at will between worlds and, like a shaman’s animal guides, to take him imaginatively with it. His apprehension that this ‘holiest’ of the creatures of Nature’s unspoiled, ‘sacred’ world appeared especially for him, reinforces this and indicates, also, the source of Hughes’ belief that he had a special role to play in our society.

Because of these early experiences, fishing, like poetry, was Hughes’ lifelong passion, and he acknowledged the connection between these two activities to be very close. In that same BBC broadcast in 1965, Hughes described both poetry and fishing as the

“pursuit of something hidden”. Fishing, he said, “satisfies a need and arouses a passion”, giving expression to “feelings, instincts and energies” which civilisation has “bottled up”: the “pursuit of poems” serves a similar purpose. Both activities are rituals which deal directly with the natural energies and, as such, he believed that both contain an “element of danger”. Hughes’ feelings when dealing with these energies are expressed most strongly in his poems about fish and fishing, especially in *River*. He evokes the tense hunting atmosphere in which “the hunter is also the hunted” (BBC 1965); and he conveys his fear of the primitive “Darkness beneath night”’s darkness” (‘Pike’, THCP.84–6) in the unknown depths of water and the mind, and his sense of entering another, very different, world².

“Go fishing / Join water, wade in underbeing” (R.42) he writes in *River*, where his entry and return from the elemental other-world has become most accomplished but no less fraught with danger. The waters he fishes hide terrifying monsters, “Killers from the egg” (‘Pike’); he is “hunted / and haunted by apparitions from tombs” (‘Earth–Numb’ (THCP.541); and the river itself is “Alive and malevolent” (‘Stealing Trout on a May Morning’ (THCP.137)), roping his ankles like “a drowned woman” and rushing “headlong” past him like a routed army, “Mixed with planets, electrical storms and darkness” which tear “the spirits from my mind’s edge and from under”. At times, too, the river is “evil”, a “grave” where “The strange evil / Of unknown fish–minds” lies in wait for him (R.76;62). These fish which lurk beneath the “smoothing tons of dead element” are one with it, so that when one bites “the river grabs at me ... stiffens alive ... the whole river hauls” and the struggle between Man and fish becomes a struggle with the elements:

Something terrified and terrifying
Gleam–surges to and fro through me
From the river to the sky, from the sky into the river
Uprooting dark bedrock, shatters it in air,
Cartwheels across me, slices thudding through me
As if I were the current – ‘Earth–Numb’ (THCP.541).

Having faced and overcome the fears and dangers of the elemental struggle, Hughes, momentarily, becomes part of the timeless elemental world. This change brings new insights and new perspectives: so, in ‘Stealing Trout on a May Morning’, when just such a translocation occurs, the fisherman looks back on himself and his world and sees both fixed in time like a scene “in a painting”.

Always, in his encounter with the elements, the reward Hughes seeks is renewal: a shamanic, alchemical, re–creation such as occurs in ‘Go Fishing’ (R.42). There, the poem is both descriptive and directive: “Go fishing”, Hughes tells us, “Join water, wade into underbeing”. We, like Hughes, must enter the timeless water–world, be “assumed into the womb”, healed, “supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles”, “dissolved”, “dismembered”, and made part of the cosmic flux – “everything circling and flowing and hover–still”. Thus, we may be re–born “new and nameless” into the urgent world of “time” and “people”. Again, in this process, the human form is exchanged for that of fish – is supplanted

By sudden rainbow monster–structures
That materialise in suspension gulping

And dematerialise under pressure of the eye. 'River' (R.42)

Initially, Hughes' boyhood fascination with the underwater realm, and his imaginative excursions into this elemental world, concerned only himself. Describing these experiences in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes makes us aware of the boy's feeling that he has a special relationship with Nature. Yet, in the first of these poems – 'The Canal's Drowning Black', 'The Long Tunnel Ceiling', and 'Under the World's Wild Rims' – there is no suggestion that he was aware of any implications in this for society in general. Only in the broader context of the poetic sequence, and from the perspective of the mature poet, do the boy's actions and feelings have special significance and suggest that Hughes found the source of his visionary, prophetic, shamanic role in those early events. The beautiful poem, 'Two', is the first to openly suggest Hughes' shamanic identity, but it does so only to describe the failure of his powers when his older brother, "the guide" and hero of his childhood, left home to join the wartime Royal Air Force. Such was the impact of this separation on Hughes that the shamanic

feather fell from his head.

The drum stopped in his hand.

The song died in his mouth. 'Two' (ROE.80)

'Two' is one of the most powerful and evocative poems in the *Elmet* sequence, but without information concerning the events from which it sprang its inclusion in the sequence can be puzzling. Answering my queries about it, Hughes wrote:

'Two' is simply about my brother and myself. He was ten years older than me and made my early life a kind of paradise ... (sic) which was ended abruptly by the war. He joined the RAF, and after the war he came to Australia, where he still lives. The closing of Paradise is a big event ... (Letter, 10 Nov. 1982).

Certainly, the images of the poem depict a paradise on Earth, a paradise overflowing with light, colour and beauty. But there are mythological allusions, too, which belie Hughes' claim that the poem is 'simply' about himself and his brother. The world we are shown is a world held in the "cupped hand" of the Dawn–Goddess, Eos; and the two figures step into it like her twin star–god sons, Hesperus and Phosphorus, who are also Venus and Jupiter who "year in and year out / Contend for the crown / Of morning star and of evening star" (R.118).

In classical mythology, Hesperus, the Morning Star, is the Star of Life; and Phosphorus (Lucifer) is the Evening Star which leads in the Moon. Between these twin aspects of the Star–son, a perpetual war is waged for the favour of the Moon–Goddess.

Discussing this myth in *The White Goddess*, Robert Graves cites a number of different versions, including a Celtic one in which Gwythyr, Son of Greidyawl (Son of Scorcher), and his rival Gwyn, "fight every May Day until the Judgment" for Creiddylad, daughter of Ludd Llaw Ereint (Silver Hand) (WG.387–9). So, the "scorched talons of crows", which Hughes' two star–beings brought when they "dropped" like birds "from the woods that hung in the sky", may well link them with Gwythyr and Gwyn. Similarly, the image may

suggest other paired and warring Celtic heroes, for the crow, like its relative the raven, is the oracular bird of many Celtic gods and goddesses, including the hag, Cerridwen, and Bran, the God of England.

The heavenly origin of Hughes' two beings is suggested in the poem by the way "the sun poured out of their feet" and the "streams spoke oracles of abundance" at their coming. But there is ambiguity as to the ownership of the "scorched talons" and the description also fits the black, leathery, wrinkled feet of real crows, such as those which Hughes, acting "as a retriever" of the birds and animals shot by his older brother on the moors, must frequently have handled (PIM.16). So, merged with the mythological allusions, there is a realistic picture of two poachers stepping from a wooded skyline down the dewy dawn-lit hillside carrying the "swinging bodies of hares", "stolen grouse" and snipe in their hands. Paralleling this interweaving of myth and reality in the poem, the deserted, worn, stone steps leading to and from the sky in Fay Godwin's accompanying photograph allow us the imaginative freedom to fill them with the images prompted by the poem.

If the events of 'Two' describe, as Hughes said, "the closing of Paradise" for him, then his choice of 'Mount Zion' as the poem which immediately follows 'Two' in the sequence indicates something of the nature of the war which now "opened" in his life. It was a war against the all-pervasive influence of this 'cowled, Satanic Majesty' which overshadowed the valley, threatening to destroy all imagination and joy; a war between the inner and outer worlds of Mankind, of which the World War which took his brother from him was but an extension. This is the lifelong conflict which Hughes sought to end, not only for himself but for society too, trying, through his poetry, to counteract the growing sterility.

Fortunately, Hughes' shamanic powers did not die. As experience replaced innocence and "life grew more complicated" (PIM.16), Hughes began to channel his hunting instincts into writing poetry. At first he did not recognise that this was happening. Describing these changes in his early life in *Poetry in the Making*, he wrote:

It was years before I wrote what you could call an animal poem and several more years before it occurred to me that my writing poems might be partly a continuation of my earlier pursuit. Now I have no doubt (PIM.7).

As Hughes' certainty about this strengthened, he came to see the hunting of poems not only as a way of immersing himself in Nature's energies, but also as means by which more of such healing energies might be returned to the world. He was convinced, too, of the power of the imaginative arts to both destroy and heal. Throughout his working life he presented these views many times: in particular, his discussion of Crow with Egbert Faas in 1971 (UU.197–208); his two essays on 'Myth and Education' (WP.136–1533); and his 'Panegyric and Ode: The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly' (WP.84–102), express them forcefully.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes' beliefs, and his poetic hunting skills, were sufficiently developed to enable him to use the imaginative energies to re-create his childhood

experiences, whilst, at the same time, he suggested their significance in relation to his present healing and energising purposes. So, we become aware of the mature poet's idea that the first magical appearance of the Trout in his childhood world had the extraordinary, personal significance of a sign from the "wild god" of his future role. Similarly, the flung stones of childhood vandalism, described in 'Under The World's Wild Rims' (ROE.79), become the first acts of Hughes' continuing collaboration with Nature in the attempt to enlighten this "worn-out", twilight world.

It is a measure of Hughes' skill that such retrospective interpretations of his early feelings and actions did not interfere with his ability to re-create his initial spontaneity. In 'Under the World's Wild Rims', for example, we share the boy's impressions of the weird, "desecrated", dust-filled landscape through which he walks to school. Compared to the world's 'wild rims', this was a strange world, deathly and unnatural, strewn with "steel objects" that seemed "magical" and "futuristic" in their unfamiliarity, and leaking a "warm horror", so that it both repelled and fascinated him. Instinctively the boy responded to these conflicting emotions with a campaign of stealthy and pleasurable destruction, smashing, "one by one", the regimented, guardian rows of "glass skylights" that seemed to watch him.

That the resulting benefits to Nature were not, at the time, intended, is made plain in the text, where it is clearly the destructive power of "five hundred stones" which gave the boy his "purpose". In the final stanza, however, the boy's purpose and the skylights which prompted it are both linked with the results, and the whole movement of the poem culminates in the fertile image of sun on flowers. Thus, Hughes suggests his retrospective appreciation of the subconscious workings of Nature within the boy. And, by paralleling the boy's destructive actions with those of horned vandal-warriors, an image by which he characterises the infiltrating weeds, he reiterates his adult views on the inevitable and destructive resurgence of suppressed energies.

Hughes, as a boy, responded to Nature's promptings and became the wild god's unwitting tool. Writing this poem as a mature poet, he deliberately took up Nature's cause; and substituting imagination for stones, he attempted to break through the rational structures that we erect, like the "green skylights" of those Calder Valley factories, to guard our precarious state of order and darkness from any disruptive beams of energy from the Source.

Unlike the biblical closing of Paradise, the passage from innocence to experience is gradual. In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes does not detail his journey to maturity, that is not his purpose; but he does include the significant factors which shaped his role of visionary prophet and shaman. So, in the poems that follow 'Two', we find that the terrifying, pervasive influence of chapel religion on the "Jibbing" (ROE.82) boy is tempered by the love and pride inspired in him by the old people of the valley, by the land itself, and by the example of the Brontes (Emily in particular) who had shared his love of the "dark Paradise" (ROE.96) of Nature.

The old people of 'Crown Point Pensioners' (ROE.89) and fiercely independent

Yorkshiremen like Billy Holt, are, like Hughes' uncle in the dedicatory poem of the series his people ... his "roots" (ROE.7). In their memories ... their "yarning" ... as in the "archaeology of the mouth" which Hughes' uncle brought him, there lies "the prize of a lifetime": a "last inheritance" which hangs on the fragility of breath as air is "hijacked in the larynx / To fly a dream" (ROE.7) and "vowels furl downwind, on air like silk" (ROE.89). Hughes is painfully aware that "any moment now" the "frayed, fraying hair–fineness" of this thread may break and their song will be gone (ROE.7).

Meanwhile, "what has escaped the demolisher" are the "indigenous memories", the last fragments of the "dreams" of the old world. These memories are the inheritance which is "furthered" in the throats of the old people. But although they are "attuned to each other like the strings of a harp" their yarning comes from "inside their masks" as if from "puppets". With this curious image, and by the metaphor of harping musicians singing "of a lost kingdom", Hughes seems to convey a vision of court minstrels – those, perhaps, whom Robert Graves called "gleemen" and who unknowingly transmitted fragments of ancient bardic lore in their music (WG.17–26). Listening to the "mesmerising music" made by the old people, Hughes is stirred (as they are) by the "wild melody, wilful improvisation", and he hears "the authentic tones / The reverberations" of ancestors who drew their energy from the land around them. Hughes' own attunement to the ancient music is apparent in the rhythms and mood of his poetry, through which he conveys with tenderness and pride the beauty of these old people, "each one bowed at his dried bony profile, as at a harp" (ROE.89).

Matching his music to his subject, Hughes makes 'For Billy Holt' (ROE.90) a taciturn but humorous portrayal of the strengths and weaknesses of his people – their stoic, self-sufficient endurance in their unwelcoming "graveyard... / homeland"; their "poverty that cut rock–lumps for words"; and their "far veiled gaze of quietly / Homicidal appraisal". Fay Godwin's photograph opposite this poem shows two elderly, amiable-looking, friends chatting over a pint of ale, and a grim-looking man seemingly appraising the photographer. Elizabeth Gaskell, writing of the people of the West Riding of Yorkshire (Elmet) in 1919, described their "strong sagacity and the dogged power of will which seem almost a birthright". She wrote that "their accost is curt, their accent and tone of speech blunt and harsh" and that although they have "a quick perception of character and a keen sense of humour", "dwellers among them must be prepared for certain uncomplimentary, though most likely true, observations, pithily expressed". They have, she wrote "an air of independence rather apt to repel strangers", and she attributes their character, as does Hughes, to their Norse ancestry 4.

'Heptonstall' (ROE.92) is Hughes' lament for all these old people and their aged disintegrating world.

Through these elders, through his attunement to the raw elemental freedom of the moors, and through his affinity with those, like the Brontes, who shared his passions, Hughes first learned to listen and respond to the music within himself which connected him with his roots and with Nature. By these means, he counteracted the destructive aspects of his early environment. Unlike the puppet singers, however, Hughes became

aware of his ability to hear and transmit this music; and, alerted by his visions and by watching the death throes of the Calder Valley, he came to believe in its importance to Mankind, and of the dangers of seeking to repress this valuable link with the energies of the Source.

In his work, Hughes constantly explored these beliefs and expressed them with growing conviction, seeking to enlighten others to the 'truths' he apprehended. In 'Tick Tock Tick Tock' (ROE.120), he looked back on his earlier life from the standpoint of the mature poet and saw himself as the crocodile in Peter Pan which had swallowed an alarm-clock⁵ – a primitive creature, embodying the natural energies and carrying the message of time and change to the nescient 'children' of the Calder Valley.

The ticking of the clock moves relentlessly through the poem like the crocodile, portending danger and disaster: but an "everlasting" "summer" of childhood pervades the Calder Valley, making it, like Peter Pan's Neverland, a place where no-one ever grows up. Earlier in the Elmet sequence, Hughes has suggested the blindness of the people, the misdirection of their energies and their child-like capacity for play: now, he brings all these qualities together in the conceit of the school playground and the story of Peter Pan. There is no need to posit an actual childhood game to explain this conceit, as Scigaj does in his discussion of this poem; and there has been no such game commonly played by English children⁶, although the story of Peter Pan was familiar to most children of Hughes' generation through a tradition of Christmas performances. In the light of the rest of the sequence, the macadamed playground across which Hughes crawled as the crocodile can be seen as the Calder Valley itself, in which the primitive energies have existed "from prehistory" : and the "school" is the school of life⁷.

Set against the relentless passage of time, Remains of Elmet has shown us, already, a world of human foolishness; an unenlightened world of 'imbecile innocence' (to borrow an apt phrase from Cave Birds), which "incinerates itself happily / From a hundred mill chimneys"(ROE.120). These people of Elmet, like Blake's sleepers of Ulro, have enslaved themselves so thoroughly to the demands of war, materialism and false religion that they are unaware of any reality beyond their daily lives: and even in these they are deluded. Hughes has shown us the reality of their lives – the harsh environment, the slavery, the decay – but, to them, summer seems to follow summer in endless procession, and the land and the old people seem, as they often do to children, "unalterable". Red Admiral Butterfly Only the wings of the butterflies (which in folklore are believed to be souls and are associated with witches, priestesses of the Goddess), beating like "pulsing wounds" around them, suggest some underlying horror.

Unlike those who "acted" Peter Pan (the word suggests the falsity of their role), Hughes, because of the different perspectives his closeness to Nature offered him, saw another reality: he saw the impending apocalypse, and sought to warn his people of it. But, because he embodied some of the energies these people had been taught to fear and suppress, he seemed dangerous and threatening. So, the image of Peter Pan's crocodile, with its embodiment of primitive energies, the rhythmical warning it carried to those whom it approached, and its aura of danger, perfectly describes Hughes' situation

from both his own perspective and theirs. It should be noted, too, that the reaction of the Neverland inhabitants to the crocodile, is remarkably similar to that of some of Hughes' critics and readers to the seemingly dangerous 'violence' of his poetry.

The interpretation of 'Tick Tock Tick Tock' that I have given here differs markedly from the psychological analysis offered by Scigaj, who believes the poem to be Hughes' attempt to "redeem and transcend" his own "exploitative attitude towards the environment"⁸. In order to support such a view, Scigaj requires of Hughes a tortuous double-blind game in which, although in the poem he plainly declares that he was the crocodile which "swallowed an alarm clock" and that "somebody else acted Peter Pan", he was, in fact, Peter pretending to be the crocodile (by mimicking the clock's tick) in order to confront his own darkness, personified in the story by Captain Hook. Scigaj's analysis requires us to believe that Hughes identified with the destructive elements at work in the Calder Valley and felt some personal guilt for its fate, something which is nowhere apparent in this sequence. It also equates "the ageless realm of Neverland" with "the Sacred". Such an identification is difficult to support from the text, where the imagery of profane time (the tick of the clock, the "pendulum", the recurrent seasons) establishes the connection between Peter Pan, the valley and the school playground, and where we are told that it was the "everlasting play" of the people that caused the pollution and death.

Nor does Scigaj's interpretation take account of the position of the poem in the Remains of Elmet sequence, where it is carefully placed so that the slow build-up of tension within it, culminating in a powerful symbol of primitive and predatory natural energy, prepares us for the apocalyptic climax described in 'Cock-Crows' (ROE.121), which immediately follows.

'Tick Tock Tick Tock', in the synchronic way of this poetic sequence, reiterates the events which have led to this apocalypse, but it also conveys Hughes' interpretation of his own prophetic and shamanic role. As elsewhere in Remains of Elmet, the implications of this poem have a scope which extends beyond the confines of the Calder Valley to embrace us all, for Hughes' warning of impending disaster is brought to us, too. He has repeatedly warned us of our errors which, like those of the people of Elmet, are of arrogance and blindness, "braggart-browed complacency" ('Egghead' (THCP.33)), and of refusal and suppression of the natural energies. With the inevitability with which the ticking clock of Peter Pan's crocodile marks the approach of danger, these errors will (Hughes believed) lead us to disaster.

In Remains of Elmet Hughes' warnings are repeated most strongly. He uses this poetic and photographic re-creation of the fate of the Calder Valley not only as an example, but also as a powerful imaginative tool with which to stimulate us to awareness. At the same time, by describing for us certain events of his childhood, he, as it were, establishes his credentials for this task. Hughes, however, was not merely a prophet of doom. In adopting the persona of the crocodile, Hughes shared the destructive and creative energies associated with this animal in mythology and folklore where, like its relatives the serpents and dragons, it is a symbol of fecundity and power. The crocodile

is linked, too, with Leviathan who is “king over all the children of pride” (Job. XL1:34) and, symbolically, with foresight and knowledge. And the old belief that crocodile eggs were magically hatched from the river mud by the power of the sun associates the beast with the natural alchemical power by means of which water, earth and sun are joined in the processes of creation.

Thus, with typical care and precision, Hughes chose as a symbol of his own role a creature which represents the powers of the Goddess here on Earth. Being amphibious, it moves with shamanic ease between water and land, linking the two worlds to which we belong – the watery world from which we came in prehistoric times and which also (for Hughes) represented the unconscious energies and our present land-based, reason-dominated world. Because of such shamanic powers, Hughes’ prophecies of disaster are not untempered with hope. In his role of poet/shaman/chemist, he not only poetically transforms the death of the Calder Valley society into a spiritual re-birth (‘Heptonstall Cemetery’ (ROE.122)), he also brings to us some transforming imaginative energies which might allow us to attain our own enlightenment and spiritual release.

Such enlightenment, however, as shown in *Cave Birds* and in the final poem of *Remains of Elmet*, will only be achieved when we recognise and accept our participation in the world of Nature and our equality with all other living things in this respect; when we examine our roots (as Hughes did) and finally understand that for true knowledge our senses must be opened to the world around us.

In the reality of our world, in the eternal cycles of Nature where finite and infinite combine, lies the truth. And the truth is, as Hughes’ book *What Is The Truth?* so beautifully explains, that God, the supreme expression of the spirit, is in every living thing: that, in Blake’s words, “every thing that lives is Holy” (MHH.27:chorus). So, as he constantly did in all his work, and particularly in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes brings us back to the physical world in order to show us the Universal Energies of Nature at the source of everything, and to demonstrate the impossibility of existence without them. Beneath our feet, “joined with earth and engraved in rock” (ROE.125), lie the lessons of our mother – Nature.

Walls

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River

“the liturgy of the earth's tidings” (R.122)

An Addendum at the end of this chapter provides detailed notes about the origin of *River* and the difficulties leading to publication, based on correspondence between Ted Hughes, Peter Keen (photographer) and Olwyn Hughes (Hughes' sister and agent) which is now held in the British Library (Add.Ms 88615).

River Cover

In *River*, Hughes turned again to Nature for his inspiration, and, choosing the watery interface where he had been most aware of her powers since childhood, he immersed himself and his readers in the primordial energies which abound there. Again, he undertook the hunting activities which, in the natural and the poetic worlds, were always his means of communication with the energies; and, in the river waters of this sequence, he literally and metaphorically found the Source of life.

In *River*, as in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes' vision of cosmic unity is presented through the actual. In the physical reality of Nature he saw the 'perfect Whole', as Blake did, in "Minute Particulars: Organized" (Jer.91:20–21), and it is these 'particulars' which he recreates accurately and evocatively in his poems. His awareness of minute particulars extends, also, to the words, images and symbols that he chooses; and to the presentation of his work. In *River*, illustrations again play an integral part and, although the photographs by Peter Keen were not the inspiration for Hughes' poems, they often "extend implications, deepen tragedy, heighten insights", just as Leonard Baskin suggested illustrations should do¹.

Hughes' vision of the world, and the way in which he presents it, is holistic. In this respect, as Scigaj ably demonstrated, it closely resembles the world-view of many Oriental philosophies and of Taoism in particular (Scigaj *passim*). Yet, in his concern for the Oriental influences that he found in Hughes' work, Scigaj overlooked the very Englishness of the world which Hughes' poetry describes. Despite the universal applicability of Hughes' beliefs and ideas, the concrete reality in which he grounds his imagery is overwhelmingly that of the English countryside. In addition, his poetic techniques and his ideas clearly owe much to the long history of English poetry and poets, and a constant shaping influence on his work was his English/Celtic background. New ideas, environments and experiences added new dimensions to Hughes' beliefs, which remained remarkably consistent over the years, but his work continually demonstrated the deep and persistent influence of his own 'Anglo–Saxon–Norse–Celtic' heritage.

Hughes' strong belief in the entrenchment of this particular heritage in the English "blood" are expressed in 'Asgard for Addicts' (WP.40–1). And Hughes' Goddess clearly belongs to the pre-Christian "deities of our instinct and ancestral memory", where "our real mental life has its roots, where the paths to and from our genuine imagination run". In all his varied representations of her, she typifies the description given by Anne Ross, in Pagan Celtic Britain, of "the basic Celtic goddess type". She is

mother, warrior, hag, virgin, conveyor of fertility, of strong sexual appetite... giver of prosperity to the land, protectress of the flocks and herds (Ross.232–245)².

Her presence gives the natural world which Hughes describes mythical and sacred dimensions, but it brings it, also, disruptive primitive and pagan energies. Because of this, the uncompromising realism of Hughes' picture of Nature often seems excessively and disturbingly explicit. Yet, the constant and inseparable presence of life and death, the perpetual "travail of raptures and rendings" (R.122) which inform Hughes' perception of our mutable world (especially in the Moortown Elegies, which were published in the same year as *Remains of Elmet*), convey the combination of beauty and horror in Nature which evinces the presence of the Goddess.

River, in particular, shows the inspirational influence of Hughes' own Celtic divine ancestor, Brigantia ('High One'), a powerful Celtic goddess widely associated with rivers and with healing and fertile waters. Her territory spread far beyond Elmet to the whole of the North of England, and was probably even wider, since her name relates her to the Old Irish goddess, Brigid (later St. Bride), who was worshipped all over the British Isles³. Appropriately, Brigid is not only a goddess of rivers and wells, she is also described in the Celtic Irish sagas as "a woman of poetry, and the poets worshipped her"⁴. Her presence eddies and flows through River, enduring and changeable as the river-waters themselves which, for the Celts, were a "physical personification of the goddess, mirroring her own supernatural forces – strength, the powers of destruction, fertility"⁵.

She is fickle and subtle, sensuous and evil, young and old, and two-faced, like Brigid, whose description in the sagas asserts that "one side of her face was ugly, but the other side was very comely" (Gregory.28). At times, in River, she may be "a beautiful idle woman" stirring "her love-potion – ooze of balsam / Thickened with fish-mucous and algae" to seduce her lover to "copulation and death" (R.88): or else, an "evil" witch in "the drought river of slimes", "old-blood dark", creating "sick-bed darkness" with her "hangings of hemlock and nettle, and alder and oak" (R.76). She may be a "brown musically-moving beauty", a lithe daughter "remorselessly" fleeing her distraught and bleeding Earth-father (R.106): or a welcoming "grandmotherly" spirit, whose reassuring presence nevertheless exudes "a fishy nostalgia" for some sultry and exotic past (R.102) (the word 'fishy', here, beautifully captures the slightly suspect sweetness of the grandmother as well as her connection with the river).

Hughes' Goddess in River takes many forms. As the land and the elements personified she becomes a snowy "juicy bride", joined in a sensual, sexual embrace with the river (R.14); she is a mother, whose breasts are the hills where flowing springs form "the shining paps that nurse the river" (R.30); or she is a goddess, whose son, a sacrificed god "fallen from heaven, lies across / The lap of his mother" (R.74) as in a *pieta*. She is present, too, as the river creatures, linked to them by Celtic and other mythologies but always embodied in animals, birds and insects which are part of the English countryside. She is there in the "merry mink" (R.32), Hawthorn which shares its ancestry with Hughes' Otter (THCP.79), with the weasels in *Remains of Elmet* (ROE.63), and with the mysterious "dark other" whose "pad-clusters", like the mink's "stars", dot the river margins at dawn (R.116). Her energies fill the ghostly white heron (R.20) and the "abortion-doctor" cormorant (R.90), the hermaphrodite eel and the long-legged,

predatory insects – the Damselfly (a “dainty assassin” in her “snakeskin leotards” (R.96)), the “blood-mote mosquito”(R.84), the midges, and the spiders which lurk, watchful and industrious, in several of the poems (R.56,26,96,120). The Goddess is amongst the flowers, too, her nature expressed in the “too fleshy perfume” of the Hawthorn (R.20) and in the heavy “nightfall pall of Balsam” (R.96); in the exuberance of primroses and “wild, stumpy daffodils” (R.22); and in the threat of the honeysuckle’s “fangs” (R.68).

Honeysuckle

In River, as in all Hughes’ other work, the Goddess’s presence is all pervasive; but sharing equal prominence with her in this sequence are the fish – Salmon and Trout – which “worship the source, bowed and fervent” (R.118). These are the shamanic guides which move at will through the fluid, mercurial interface between this world and the Otherworld of the imagination, drawing Hughes with them. They are the familiars of the Goddess, gaining their life and energy from her waters, absorbing her magical and sinister powers, and sharing her duplicity. They, too, were revered by the Celts, because of their kinship with the five sacred salmon of Celtic mythology who once fed on the fruit of the nine hazels of wisdom, inspiration and “the knowledge of poetry”, that grew over their “well beneath the sea”⁶

Hughes clearly shares the Celtic reverence for these fish, which he describes as ‘holy’ and magical. Like the Celts, he links them closely with inspiration and poetry. For him, however, it is not eating the fish which “brings all knowledge and all poetry”, (as the Celts believed⁷), but the ritual pursuit of them, the primitive hunt undertaken with a bagful of “lures and hunter’s medicine enough // For a year in the Pleistocene” (R.38).

Hunting, whether for fish or for poetry, was Hughes’ passion; and it was the means by which he effected the “time-warped” (R.50) movement between one reality and another such as he describes, for example, in ‘Go Fishing’ (R.42). This was the “ancient thirst” (R.56) which drew him to the “brink of water” where Celtic poets, too, thought “poetry was revealed to them”⁸. In River, water is “the generator”, “the power line”, “a chrism of birth”, “The medicinal mercury creature” (R.16), and Hughes soaked up its refreshing energy

through every membrane

As if the whole body were a craving mouth,

As if a hunted ghost were drinking – sud-flecks

Grass-bits and omens

Fixed in the glass. – ‘River Barrow’ (R.56)

In River, the “river-fetch” exerts a hypnotic attraction which can whirl him into the vortex like

the epileptic’s strobe,

The yell of the Muezzin

Or the “Bismillah!”

That spins the dancer in... – ‘Riverwatcher’(R.108)

It can lull him with its “smooth healing” peace, and leave him “half–unearthed” (R.56). Yet, it is the encounters with the fish, real or poetic, which activate Hughes’ primitive hunting energies. It is these encounters which revive the telepathic (R.38) link between hunter and hunted (“Eerie how you know when it’s coming!” (R.48)), and provide a new, energising exposure to the dangerous, scalp–prickling, necessary, primordial and primeval powers.

In the watery abyss, the fish are “rainbow monster–structures” (R.42). A young, fertile, cock salmon, “brindled black and crimson, with big precious spots” (R.10), ages to become “King salmon” (R.84); but by “Four years old at most” it is “already a veteran, / Already a death–patched hero. So quickly it’s over!” (R.110). Yet, even with bleeding gills, and with its, “red–black almost unrecognisable” and its “dragonized head”, it is still “A god, on earth for the first time, / With the clock of love and death in his body.” (R.64). There are mythical dimensions to these creatures, too, suggestive of sacrificed gods, and in Hughes’ descriptions of them there are echoes of Blake’s vision of the “monstrous serpent”, Leviathan:

his forehead was divided into streaks of green & purple like those on a tygers forehead: soon we saw his mouth and red gills hang just above the raging foam tingeing the black deep with beams of blood, advancing towards us with all the fury of a spiritual existence. (MHH.18:28–33).

So, each encounter with fish becomes a rehearsal of the mythical confrontation with the marine–monster Tiamat/Leviathan, the serpent of chaos and creation: a new acknowledgment of the destructive/creative powers which pervade our world, and which must repeatedly be faced and reconciled by each of us. Beneath the mercurial “water mirror” (R.56) which draws Hughes to its edge with its “solid mystery”, in the “sliding place” (R.56) where imagination and reality, subconscious and conscious, meet, there lurk submarine monsters. Their “Torpedo / Concentration”, “mouth–aimed intent” and “savagery” await him in a menacing stillness (R.62) disturbed only by their pulsing gills. Hughes’ awareness of these watchful predators, and his references to prehistoric geological and mythological eras⁹ create an atmosphere filled with primitive terrors into which he ventures with trepidation, a “pilgrim for a fish” (R.80), confronting and conquering his fears like a questing hero and returning, ultimately, to create poetic order from a chaos of sensations and thoughts.

Typically, the fish which Hughes hunts in River and elsewhere – Salmon, Trout and Pike, and even the predatory luminescent deep–sea fish, Photostomias, of which he wrote in Moortown (THCP.549) – do have a factual connection with prehistoric geological eras. All, until very recently, were included in the biological Order, Salmoniformes, from which all present bony fish are thought to have evolved¹⁰. All differ little in form from their fossil ancestors, which provide the first evidence of the existence of marine vertebrates. It is believed, too, that from such marine vertebrates as these, terrestrial vertebrates evolved¹¹. So, Hughes calls these fish, with some justification, “my fellow aliens from prehistory” (R.46) and “Miraculous fossils” (R.80). And it is equally typical of the care and precision of Hughes’ work, that his choice of the latter epithet should convey more than the ‘miracle’ of these creatures’ lineage, being

linked, as it is in 'Gulkana' (R.80), with the eternal, the mythical and the holy.

In River, the 'miraculous' aspects of the fish have very little to do with their importance to science. Rather, they stem from Hughes' own special reverence for the fish and the connections which they facilitate for him between his inner and outer worlds. By re-enacting his encounters with the fish, Hughes remakes these connections and, in so doing, creates his poems. He also attempts to share his experience with others by involving them imaginatively in the process and, thereby, transmitting to them some of the fishes' power. In effect, the fish, like other aquatic creatures in Hughes' work, become powerful and functional symbols of hope. They provide a natural example of reconciled energies and they facilitate such a reconciliation in Mankind. In his poems, Hughes exploits their biological, geological and mythological significance to give them the imaginative life and energy they need for this purpose.

The extent of the power which Hughes ascribes to fish can be judged by examining the Moortown poems, 'Photostomias' 1,2 and 3, (THCP.549) , whilst keeping in mind his beliefs in the nature and imminence of the primordial energies. Photostomias are "small, predatory, luminous fish of the great deeps", creatures of the 'roofless Gulf-cellars", and in them Hughes finds the perfect natural symbol for reconciled contradictory energies. Each fish is literally a light-bearer of the dark abyss, a grotesque creature of horror and of beauty, which Hughes calls "the radiant host" akin to "the tiger / In his robe of flames". Photostomia Like Blake's tiger¹², and like Hughes' own tiger in 'Tiger Psalm' (THCP.577), it is an embodiment of contraries. And, like every tiger, it is part of the natural order, an exquisite balance of form and function: it eats and is eaten – is "A feast charged with lights, / Searching for guests" but death in its jaws is "apotheosis", resorption into the divine cosmic order So, like the tiger in 'Tiger Psalm', it "blesses with a fang"; it kills and "Does not kill but opens a path / Neither of Life nor of Death" but to a vision of paradoxical unity through which we may glimpse the perfect whole.

With punning accuracy, Hughes calls Photostomias, "the radiant host": communion with them may enlighten our own dark, spiritual depths, just as they light the watery depths of our planet. Each is a "Buddha-faced", a "Jehovah", "A decalogue / A rainbow", a sign and a promise of some greater, divine order: and, like the salmon in River, each of these "creatures of light" (R.72) may be seen as a manifestation of the polymorphous Hermes/Mercury, whose guiding, spiritual light constantly illuminates Hughes' work.

Photostomias, as Hughes makes clear, are not unique in the guidance and promise they offer. Not only do their close relatives, Salmon and Trout, share their 'holy' and sinister powers and impart their own blessing, enlightenment and apotheosis (as the massed salmon do in 'That Morning' (R.72)), but such qualities are present also in Nature's more common and seemingly ordinary creatures. Strange and rare as Photostomias may appear in their inhospitable environment, they are no more miraculous a manifestation of "the organising and creative energy itself" (WP.92) than any other living thing. They are

... no further

From belief's numb finger
Than the drab-jacketed
Glow-worm beetle, in a spooky lane,
On a wet evening.
The Peacock butterfly, pulsing
On a September thistle-top
Is just as surely a hole
In what was likely.

Each life form is equally a miraculous crystallisation of cosmic energy; a "star-hardened" miracle of survival, like the "miserly heather-flower", (cf. 'Heather' in *Remains of Elmet*). Each is, also, part of the perpetual cycles of death and rebirth, and we may glimpse beneath each "created glory" (WP.13) the death and horror which are a necessary part of its existence in this "fallen World" (which is what Hughes calls our own world in *River* (R.72)). Because of this, Hughes turns constantly to Nature in order to demonstrate the necessary and harmonious interaction of contrary energies in Earthly existence. In particular, however, it was always the birth of beauty from horror, the relationship between renewal and sacrifice, mana and death, and the creation of spiritual gold from earthly dross, which fascinated him and which lay at the heart of his beliefs and his work.

Beneath the wonder of natural life, Hughes was aware, always, of the necessity and inevitability of death. Our own awareness of this (whether conscious or subconscious) may cause us fear and horror, but Hughes believed that we are aware of something more – a divine horror which is, in Lorca's words, "beyond death" (WP.92) – and it is this he discussed in his essay on Baskin's art, 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly' (WP.84–102). As well as finding it in Nature, Hughes also discovered this divine horror in great art and music. Attempting to define it, he called it, in his Baskin essay, "a secretion from the gulf itself", an exudation of the "ineffable, infinite affliction of being" which connects, "as it seems, everything to everything, and everything to the source of itself" (WP.92) . This is Lorca's *Duende* which, Hughes wrote, lies at "the core of life, like the black ultimate resource of the organism"; and it is mana – the healing "ectoplasmic essence" for which payment must be made through suffering but which Hughes described as "more than metaphorically, redemption incarnate".(WP.93).

In many ways, Hughes' discussion of the source of inspiration in Baskin's work, applied equally to his own. His quest for understanding of our world and our position in it was also the quest for mana; and the forms which this took in Hughes' work over the years conformed to his own assessment of epic as "the story of mana"(WP.100). Epic, according to Hughes, displays recognisable patterns which parallel the 'saga' of "the search for and finding of mana", and these recur in

three historically familiar forms, with religious quest as the most civilised form, and heroic epic as the barbaric form, and the shaman's dream of his flight as the prototypical and, as it were, biological form (WP.100).

Since Wodwo, Hughes poetic questing had conformed to these patterns of epic: and, whatever the truth or validity of Hughes' beliefs, his certainty that some great, healing,

cosmic force exists could, after *Cave Birds*, no longer be doubted. This force is the source of renewal which he tried to reach by deliberately exposing himself to the daemonic intensity and the “sinister beauty” (WP.89) of Nature both in his life and in his work: and it is this sinister beauty which pervades *Remains of Elmet* and *River*.

River combines all the “historically familiar forms” of epic of which Hughes wrote. Elements of religious quest, heroic epic and shamanic flight are all readily apparent. This is the “river-epic” (R.28) in which Hughes sings “the liturgy / Of the earth’s tidings” (R.122) and which is, ultimately, a creation of beauty and hope – an optimistic assertion of everlasting healing and renewal in a cosmos where “Only birth matters” (R.124). In his river-epic, Hughes seeks mana, the energy of the creative-destructive Source, in as many ways as he can. His evocation of the Goddess and her realm; his use of mythology (the Celtic mythology of his heritage, in particular); his care and concern for the musical elements of his work; and his persistent efforts to activate all our senses, are essential to his task. Besides these, there are elements of religious devotion, heroic quest, shamanic flight, alchemical transmutation, and the activation of the most primitive human energies, all enmeshed in the cosmic patterns which govern our existence. All of these elements become part of a flux of energies which mingle, like the organic elements of Nature, to create the river epic, and it needs only a close examination of a few poems to appreciate the skill with which Hughes achieves this.

Fundamental to the healing purpose of the river-epic, is the representation of water as the source of life itself. This not only reflects Mankind’s most primitive cosmogonic beliefs, as expressed in mythology and religion, it is also a currently accepted scientific ‘fact’. In ‘Flesh of Light’ (R.16), Hughes uses cosmic and alchemical imagery to describe the river’s origin and purpose, creating from its shining, reflective surface and its fluid, sinuous flow, a materialisation (a ‘flesh’) of elemental and spiritual light. OuroborosThe water, which is a “smelting” from the cosmic “core”, “brims out lowly for cattle to wade”, and the double meaning of ‘lowly’ as both ‘down low’ and ‘humble’ links heaven and earth, the divine and the mundane. But the water is also the “medicinal mercury creature”, the mythical, “fallen”, cosmic snake of chaos and renewal, with “inscribed scales / That it sheds / And renews” – the ouroboros, which Alchemists adopted as a symbol of the alchemical process of enlightenment and re-birth.

Using imagery which combines light and energy with their natural and material manifestations on Earth, Hughes conveys the pure light/energy character of water. From the “core-flash” (suggesting the ‘Big Bang’ creation of the universe) and the resulting atomic dance, comes the fluid “power-line” that carries this energy to Earth and brings the dry “bones” life. Remaining faithful to scientific concepts of energy transfer, Hughes suggests the conversion of light to electricity, the precipitation of rain, and the biological utilisation of light and water to produce energy, but his imagery is far from coldly scientific. Amidst the initial chaos of creation he pictures something alive and beautiful that “crawls and glimmers among the heather-topped stones”, then “brims out” in abundance “for cattle to wade”.

The abundance spills over into Hughes’ next image, which is as dense with meanings

as the dark, warm bodies of the cattle are “dense” with the life–giving energy they imbibe. Lifting their streaming muzzles from the water, the cattle “unspool” it as if unwinding the thread of life, and Hughes’ use of the word “glair”, its association with egg albumen and its paronomasia with ‘glare’ (meaning ‘dazzling light’), convey the importance of the role that cattle play in the transmission of the life–energies. It is this fecundity of association, as much as the power and beauty of the cattle image, that suggest the presence of the Goddess, whose mythological representation as a cow is ancient and widespread.

There is a religious aspect to the creative powers of the water, too, introduced into the poem by the use of words like ‘chrism’, ‘anoints’ and ‘aura’; words which are more usually associated with religious ceremonies but which, here, convey the spiritual nature of the medicinal mercury creature and give greater meaning to the “blossoming” it engenders. Similarly, by choosing the word ‘blossoming’ Hughes not only suggests the creation of something beautiful, he also creates resonances with his use of this word in earlier poems where he links it with symbols of mana: his own tiger, for example, is a “Beast in Blossom” (M.578) ; and the Earthly light–bearers in ‘Photostomias’ are

Blossoms

Pushing from under blossoms

From the one wound’s depth

Of congealments and healing – (THCP.549).

So, the blossoming of the sea in ‘Flesh of Light’ is an image which conjures more than the evolutionary blossoming of Earth following its creation: it conveys, also, a promise of healing, re–creation and continuance.

Finally, there is an aspect to the poem which is consistent with its primary position in the sequence in the American, Harper & Row, edition, and which is shared by ‘The Morning Before Christmas’ (R.8) , the poem which holds primary position in the English edition of *River*. It is an aspect which is closely connected with Hughes’ alchemical/shamanic purposes in *Cave Birds* and *Remains of Elmet*, and it has much to do (as will be explained) with traditional religious faith in the power of sacred rituals to transcend the material dimension of their origin and to renew Mankind’s link with the divine. In both ‘Flesh of Light’ and ‘The Morning Before Christmas’, Hughes uses poetic ritual to re–enact creation. In the first poem, Hughes begins by describing creation on a cosmic level, then moves to the delicate potential of Earthly life – the “unfolding baby fists” of the ferns and the eye–like fish–eggs in the “throbbing aura” of the river water¹³. Except for the poet, humans play no part in these events. The second poem, however, describes a ritual in which humans act a god–like part, performing “solemn”, “precarious obstetrics” which will ensure an abundance of salmon. Thus, they participate in the creation of life on Earth, an event which Mircea Eliade describes as “the central mystery of the world”¹⁴. Other of Eliade’s views may, perhaps, give us insight into Hughes’ likely purpose in beginning his poetic sequence with such ritual recreations, for there is much in *The Sacred and the Profane* that is relevant to Hughes’ work in general and to *River* in particular.

Hughes' view of Nature as a living organism, and his belief in the knowledge and enlightenment it can show us, accord well with the view of the world which Eliade attributes to "religious man" (the term is used in its broadest sense as applying to one who acknowledges some superhuman, omnipotent, omnipresent power). "For religious man", Eliade writes,

Nature is never only 'natural'; it is always fraught with religious value ... the different modalities of the sacred [are manifested] in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena.

The earth ... presents itself as universal mother and nurse. The cosmic rhythms manifest order, harmony, permanence, fecundity. The cosmos as a whole is an organism at once real, living and sacred; it simultaneously reveals the modalities of being and of sacrality (Eliade.116–7).

The similarity of these views to Hughes' beliefs is clear. What is not so clear, perhaps, is the resemblance between the epic of the river's year which Hughes presents in *River*, and the annual festivals and rituals which Eliade describes as being practiced by religious man in order to re-actualise primordial, mythological and sacred time and ensure the continuance of the world.

Sacred time, Eliade stresses, is cyclical and reversible, and he observes that "for religious man of archaic cultures" not only is the world annually renewed, but it is resanctified:

with each new year it recovers its original sanctity, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from the Creator's hand (Eliade.75).

Through religious ritual, Mankind attempts to re-establish cosmic time and to briefly enter the eternal dimension, communicate with the divine, and share its powers. Annual religious festivals, therefore, are more than a ritual performance of "acts and gestures" which "imitate the paradigmatic models established by the gods and mythical ancestors". They are also a ritual recovery of primordial time by means of which people ensure that the world is renewed and resanctified.

In the poems with which Hughes has, in different editions, begun his *River* sequence, there are recognisable parallels with this ritual re-creation of the world and of life on Earth. 'The Morning Before Christmas' (R.8), in particular, resembles one of the most widespread of annual religious festivals (and one which is discussed by Eliade in the above terms): that of the ritual cultivation of important food, by means of which Mankind ensures the fertility of the land. The slow penetration of the sun's warmth into the "brand new stillness" of the dead and frozen world; the rhythmic, precise, and painstaking actions of the men collecting the "vital broth" of eggs and sperm; the solemnity and beauty of the poem's atmosphere and music; and the way the events and the poem are marked with the prints of the fox (a symbol of fecund life—energies of particular significance to Hughes since 'The Thought Fox' (THCP.21)); all these things suggest the ritual and spiritual nature of the events described.

As Hughes' river-epic progresses through its annual cycle, other ritual re-actualisations of cosmic time occur: the mating of the gods, in 'Japanese River Tales' (R.14), for example; the "resurrection", in 'Under the Hill of Centurions' (R.36); the battle with the marine monster, in 'Gulkana' (R.80); and the sacrificial death of the god-'hero', in 'October Salmon' (R.110). Hughes, therefore, appears to ritually re-enact the primordial, mythical paradigms in the River sequence and, in so doing, he confronts the inherent dangers which exposure to the primordial energies involves. Through such encounters, through his own involvement in the events the poems describe, and through his creative striving, he voluntarily makes the payments which the life energies, the mana, demand. And, just as the river waters channel the source energies "to the roots" (R.16) of the Earthly sea and bring about its 'blossoming', so the flow of Hughes' poetic sequence seems designed to channel the life-energies of the sacred rituals into the sea of the human imagination to create another, more spiritual blossoming.

From whatever aspect of Hughes' thought one approaches River, it is soon apparent that the waters were for him, as they have always been for religious man, the ultimate source of life, energy and renewal¹⁵. The natural rhythms of the river's year provided him with a unifying theme and a rich source of natural imagery: and by linking these rhythmic patterns to events in the cosmic year, and weaving into them allusions to common religious and mythological epics, he achieved a broader, healing purpose and made this work an extension of the shamanic/alchemical task he undertook in Cave Birds and Remains of Elmet. It is unlikely, therefore, that the sequence resulted simply from Peter Keen's "desire to photograph a river, source to mouth, through an entire twelve-month cycle"¹⁶: especially since the Elmet poems concerning Hughes' encounters with fish in the waters of the Calder Valley seem clearly to prefigure the move in River towards direct poetic exploration of the aquatic interface between physical and metaphysical worlds. In effect, the waters in River become the cosmic Centre of Hughes' world: through them he enters dimensions which extend beyond the physical and the temporal; and, in these moments of altered perception, it is fish which are his most powerful shamanic and imaginative guides.

In River it is clear, too, that Hughes' previous poetic ventures into the metaphysical world had given him confidence in his beliefs and powers. In these poems, he moved directly to the source of his inspiration, wholly committing himself to an epic journey in which the cosmic rhythms of Nature drew him deeply into the world of pure energy and spirit. By carefully shaping the River sequence around these cosmic rhythms, he facilitated intimate contact with the energies from which his poems flow. He also achieved a protective ritual framework which allowed him to share in the regenerative energies he evoked: a necessary precaution, since these poems brought him closer to their dangers than ever before.

Such religious and ritual aspects in this sequence suggest that it is a mistake to identify Hughes too closely with its fisherman persona, for, although he frequently reflects Hughes' own difficulties, emotions and concerns, this persona is essentially an epic hero – a sensitive pilgrim who provides the human perspective in the river scene, and with whom the reader, as well as the poet, can identify.

Like the questing Everyman hero of *Cave Birds*, Hughes' fisherman-poet-persona in *River* is initially hampered by his analytical mind, his limited perspectives, and his closed senses. Fundamental to his quest for unity with Nature is his need to reconcile the disparate aspects of his being. He is, however, aware of his difficulties; and aware, too, of his own primitive hunting instincts and the way in which these link him with the elemental energies. Throughout his quest, the fish, and especially the salmon, are his totem creatures: their ability to return unerringly to the source of their existence parallels his own epic quest for the source of truth and knowledge. So, he holds them in special reverence, empathising with their suffering and struggles, and seeing in them the "epic poise" (R.114) and the acceptance of sacrifice which he, too, must learn in order to be part of the "machinery of heaven". Seeking their knowledge and guidance, he hunts for them as if they held the Grail or the Philosophers' Stone.

Just as the annual return of wild salmon and trout to the river is governed by the machinery of Heaven, so humans, too, are subject to the natural rhythms. The poet-persona in *River* is demonstrably affected by Nature's powers in the early poems, and his struggles for direct communion with the energies end with the moment of spiritual communion which occurs in 'That Morning' (R.72). Like the salmon, his physical energy increases as the sun's power strengthens, then fades as the year moves towards its close: and, like the salmon, his journey, his struggles and the sacrifice, must be constantly repeated.

The poet-persona's responses to Nature begin in the opening poem of the Faber edition. At the first melting penetration of the sun's life energies into the frozen mid-winter world of 'The Morning Before Christmas', his whole body responds. His "every cell" is "dazzle-stamped" by the sharp beauty of his vision of the creation of a new-wrought, Golden world. He suffers, too, the "painful", anaesthetised numbness and death which attend the birth of the "ticking egg" in 'New Year'. Spring softens his shadow in 'Four March Watercolours', as it softens the contours of the world with new growth; and, tree-like, he shares "the fraternity of survival" and the "hope of new leaf" that springtime brings.

As the pulse of Nature quickens, so the poet-persona's imaginative responses to the burgeoning world become more varied, and his link with the fish grows stronger. Looking down into the "pour of melted chocolate" (R.28) as the "snow-melt" brings the river new energy, he experiences a change in perspective, seeing his own world as if through the salmon's "lidless eyes". Under the expansive influence of the sun, the "refrozen dot-prints" (R.12) of the midwinter fox give way to the "stars at the river's brim" of the romping "Jolly goblin" mink – a primitive "Black bagful of hunter's medicine" crackling with life (R.32) – and suddenly the river swarms with fertile creatures which are "Possessed" by the uncontrollable procreative energies of the Goddess (R.34).

At first, in 'Salmon-taking Times', the persona stands 'clear' of this flood of creatures, wisely acknowledging, and acquiescing to, the Goddess's power: they, like "Swine / Bees and women cannot be turned"¹⁷. Later, wooed by the river's gentler mood, he

tries to share in its magic. Like a clumsy bridegroom, he crumples the river's "gossamer bridal'veils" and destroys the delicate "membranes": and, in so doing, he achieves a "religious moment, slightly dazzling" of creative union between his own physical and spiritual worlds. This important moment of wholeness and communion with Nature is reflected in the structure, as well as the content, of the poem. With great skill, Hughes brings together the conflicting elements of the creative act that the Celts symbolised in the half-faces of Brigantia. The tumultuous, unswerving, carnal urgings of the early lines give way to a mood of sensuous, fragile delight; the demonic power turns to tenderness; and, finally, the destruction of the protective membranes that separate one individual from another, one reality from another, leads to the moment of spiritual communion, beauty and promise that completes the poem.

The protagonist, by contrast with his own brief and clumsy communion with the Source, sees the ease with which the fishy bridegrooms play their part in Nature's pattern. They weave their lives joyously and unquestioningly into the fabric of the world,

All singing and
Toiling together,
Wreathing their metals
Into the warp and weft of the lit water. – 'Under the Hill of Centurions'(R.36).

Similarly, he ironically compares his own lumbering, alien presence in the river with the consummate skill of the Cormorant, which can dissolve at will into the fluid matrix and become one with the energies there ('A Cormorant' R.38).

Throughout the first few months of the year (a period of submerged but steady gestation and growth) the poet-persona shares the current of life in the river. By April, the "Deep labour" is almost over. Nursed by the elements, a new river, "With sinewy bulging, gluey splitting / All down its length", resembling a snake sloughing its skin or a butterfly emerging from its pupa, tries "To rise out of the river" (R.40) and the time has come for this new-made river-spirit "to alter / And to fly". Now, too, the poet persona resolves to "loosen" his spirit self (his "Ghost") into the river's elemental "water-mesh", and to "be assumed into the womb of lymph", where the eternal flux, "circling and flowing and hover-still", can heal and renew him ('Go Fishing' R.42).

As yet, his spirit is immature, and the longed-for melding of human energies with those of the Source is fraught with the difficulties of divesting his ghostly self of its unwieldy, and often ludicrous, physical "clobber", as the mock-heroic tale of the 'Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan' confirms (R.44–50). Nonetheless, there are moments of disembodiment, when the sheer power of the waters, the "superabundance of spirit", makes the persona feel "a little bit giddy / Ghostly" and the "weird" sensations of the hunt alter his normal perception of the world.

Still, for the time being, the hero's direct encounters with the elemental spirit of the river are brief and elusive, and it slips away from him "into the afterworld" like the loved, but lost, "dark fish", 'Ophelia' (R.52). Drawn to the waters by this spirit, seduced by the honeyed, timeless, mercurial magic of the river, and immune to the literal

blood—sacrifice of midge—bites that the Goddess demands (even whilst pouring over him her honeysuckled plenty), he haunts the river—bank like a “hunted ghost” from an ancient tomb (‘River Barrow’ (R.56)). Meanwhile, the cosmic dance of the Sun and Moon continues, and the elements spill their Heavenly treasure of “spirit and blood” onto the “slag of the world” (‘West Dart’ (R.58)). In this Earthly paradise of liquid light, this inverted Heaven which the elements create, the observer sees an entranced host of fish, “strangers” (R.60), who pursue their destiny with holy and selfless fervour as the river’s “sunken calendar unfurls” (R.64).

Watching the fish transfixed in the sun—dappled dawn—stillness of the summer river, the poet—persona is aware of the elemental Otherworld that they inhabit (‘Strangers’ (R.60)). Briefly, he perceives his own familiar “homebody” world as “merely” decorating their “heaven”, yet he is aware, too, of being separated from them: far from being able to share their blissful “Samadhi – worless, levitated”, his intrusion disturbs the spiritual unity, his “man—shape / Wobbles their firmament” and destroys his own vision of the “holy ones”, shrinking and refocusing his perceptions to the material dimension. The fish, however, have “got him” (‘After Moonless Midnight’ (R.62)). The magical fascination they exert holds him “deeper / With its blind invisible hands”. So, he is attuned to the waiting power in the river and sees, in the mature, over—ripe, beauty of the god—like salmon, the pathos of its sacrificial “execution and death / In the skirts of his bride”, which is part of the harvest yet to come (‘An August Salmon’ (R.64)).

At the height of summer, at the heart of the River cycle, the mellow, golden fruitfulness of the river scene is tinged with a “darkening” (‘The Vintage of River is Unending’ (R.66)) that presages the Bacchanalian overflow of Nature’s luxuriant power. In Celtic Britain, this climax of summer was marked by the orgiastic fertility rites of Lughnasad, the August festival of the god, Lugh Lamfhada (“of the long arm”), who was smith, harper, poet, hero and sorcerer¹⁸. It was also the festival—time of pastoral gods, such as the horned god, Cocius, of Northern Britain (related to Cernunnos), the Celtic Mercury who was “protector of herds and flocks”¹⁹, and of Pan and Dionysus.

‘Night Arrival of Seatrout’ (R.68) is Hughes’ own celebration of the August harvest festival. In it, the Goddess and her Celtic horned consort are almost palpably present, rioting through the massive richness of tossing oakwoods, surrounded by the threatening sensuality of full—blossomed herbs. In the central image of the poem, something strange, dangerous and beautiful erupts from the Underworld through the “river’s hole”, its nature—spirit identity conveyed by the confusing conflation of its description with that of the “upside—down buried heaven” of the river. Hughes’ skill, here, in evoking an entity which is imaginatively apprehended through a few vivid attributes, yet which remains undefined, is masterly, and somehow, “something” which symbolises everything enters the reader’s mind. “Dripping stars”, like a river—animal shaking off water, it “snarls, moon—mouthed and shivers”, Green Manthen, as the lobworms couple²⁰ and Earth covertly rejoices, the image crystallises into that of a god/shaman erupting

out in hard corn ...

Running and leaping
With a bat in his drum.

Hughes, in this poem, enacts his own, parallel, shamanic ritual, using his poetic powers to link our imaginative and rational worlds. He stirs our senses with drumming and singing rhythms, mixing repeated heavy beats (such as those which begin the lines of the first stanza) with the emphatic rhythmical energy of words like 'plunging', 'tossing', 'shattering', 'running', and 'leaping'. At the same time, he threads the drumming music with the sounds of alliteration, sibilance and assonance, to create an atmosphere in which we sense the combined beauty and horror of the "Honeysuckle hanging her fangs"; feel the weird and frightening disturbance of "the dark mist", as the "oak's mass/ Comes plunging, tossing dark antlers"; and appreciate, in the "snarls and shivers", "stars", "saliva" and the secret "singing", the hissing undercurrent of devious serpentine energy which accompanies this sudden intrusion of imagination into our rational world.

Having evoked this powerful and dangerous spirit in his sequence, Hughes now brings the Sun-god, in Kingfisher form, to control it ('The Kingfisher' (R.70)). In addition, he uses powerful shamanic and alchemical symbols, poetically wielding the shaman's magical crystal and using the alchemical process of crystallisation to control the spirit-bird's movements. So, the kingfisher vanishes from the poem "into vibrations", only to re-appear in "a shower of prisms" with its "beak full of ingots"; and to vanish and re-appear again, a

Spark, sapphire, refracted
From beyond water

The capitalising of the word 'God' in 'The Kingfisher', also suggests the Heavenly, spiritual nature of its presence, as opposed to the pagan earthiness of the horned 'god' (uncapitalised) of the previous poem. And Hughes clearly marries Heavenly and Earthly energies together in this poem, embodying them in a creature which has a known and understandable presence in the river scene but which, nevertheless, has mythological associations (with the halcyon of Greek mythology, for example) that make it a suitable symbol of divine promise. It is important, too, that Hughes' kingfisher, this "rainbow" of promise through which "God / Marries a pit / Of fishy mire", is described as "an angler", thereby confirming the symbolic importance of the fisherman figure in Hughes' work (particularly in *River*), and identifying the heroic role which Hughes allots him.

In *River*, Hughes likens the fisherman to a Japanese Noh dancer in whose performance, spirit and mind, Heaven and Earth, are linked ('Eighty and Still Fishing for Salmon' (R.100)). Both execute a 'dance' of primitive simplicity which brings them into perfect harmony with Nature. Similarly, in old age and in art, when body and spirit "are lost" and the man seems like an "old rowan- arthritic, mossed / Indifferent to man" behind his "ritual mask", then, he is closest to Nature. Rooted like an old rowan tree in the elemental world, he remains "loyal to inbuilt bearings, touch of weather", and so, reaches unity with the "vacant swirl" of the cosmos.

Long before old age, however, the fisherman-persona in *River* achieves moments of unity in which Heaven and Earth are joined and he experiences the perfect elemental

harmony of “the end” of his Journey. Such a moment is described in ‘That Morning’ (R.72) , when, at a point in the sequence when Nature’s energies have burst through the fragile membrane separating them from the rational human world, a divine apotheosis occurs: mediated by the “power of salmon”, the “golden, imperishable”, spiritual body is separated from “its doubting thought” and human beings become part of the divine energies,

alive in a river of light

Among creatures of light, creatures of light.

The slow rhythms of the poem; the dizzying image of the world “capsizing slowly” with which it begins; the “dazzle” of golden light in which the visionary experience takes place; and the biblical language in which Hughes describes the “sign”; all mark this as a moment of divine “blessing” and revelation – a moment in which selfhood and materialism are relinquished, and “we” (by the use of the plural Hughes includes us all in his vision) enter the eternal, elemental, cosmic dimension. This is a supreme religious moment of enlightenment and healing. It is the expression of mana. Significantly, the photograph which accompanies this poem, showing “a hawk–moth – on a meadow thistle” (a creature of the night caught in a glow of sunlight (R.127, note 73)) almost exactly illustrates Hughes’ earlier symbol of mana in ‘Photostomias’: “The Peacock butterfly, pulsing / On a September thistle–top” (THCP.549). For the poet–persona, and for us, the revelatory nature of this experience lies not only in the enlightenment which takes place and in the apprehension of the divine light within each individual, but also, since no actual physical death occurs, in the promise such a ‘sign’ conveys of the spiritual rebirth this divine light may bring at the end of our mortal journey.

In ‘River’ (R.74) , the title poem of the sequence, this symbolic moment of communion and promise between Man and God is repeated in the image of the sacrificed and risen god which dominates the poem. This is the central symbol of Christianity: it is central, too, in the Norse mythology which Hughes identifies as part of his heritage, and in many mythologies and religions which are based on the natural, vegetative cycles of death and rebirth. Now, the cosmic “river of light” in which the creatures of the previous poem bathed becomes the Earthly manifestation of the sacrificed god. Embodied in the waters which issue “from heaven”, he is literally “broken” and “scattered in a million pieces” in our physical world; and his energy is blocked and restrained by human contrivance, so that, often, he hangs from our constructed dam–doors like Odin “hung by the heels” at the door of the Underworld of his mother, Earth. Literally, water will split dry tombs and will rise in floods amidst lightning that rends the veils of clouds and rain, “swallowing” up death and corruption. Then, through the physical cycles of evaporation and precipitation, it will “wash itself of all deaths”, so remaining “inviolable / Immortal”. In this, and in the “spirit brightness” of water, is the god’s promise of perpetual renewal. And the Biblical symbolism of the split tombs, the “sign in the sky”, and the “rending of veils”, conveys, too, the promise of resurrection “in a time after times” at the end of our physical and temporal world.

“So the river is a god” whose agony will bring redemption, and the horror of his sacrifice will blossom into beauty. Just as Hughes describes Leonard Baskin’s ‘Hanged Man’ as

“a chrysalis, a giant larva” (WP.97) from which will emerge the symbolic Dragonfly (“the agony wholly redeemed, healed – and transformed into its opposite, by mana”), so his own sacrificed god, the river, accomplishes the same miraculous metamorphosis and transforms death into life.

Metamorphosis in dragonflies and other such creatures takes time. Between the death of the old form and the birth of the new, there lies a period of darkness and seeming chaos in which tissues dissolve and reform, and the cellular matter of the individual is, as it were, alchemically cleansed, purified and transmuted. Similarly, in the epic journey of the hero, the moment of enlightenment in which the healing power of mana suffuses his whole being does not end the story: his task, like that of the shaman, of Christ, of Job, and of other visionary prophets and epic heroes, must be completed by returning with this healing power to the darkness of the sick world to confront the evils therein.

This pattern of enlightenment followed by a return to darkness is present, too, in Nature’s cycles and in the cosmic year. Following the summer solstice, which marks the peak of the sun’s expansive influence on Earth, the energies turn inward, and the sun’s power, trapped within the cells of living organisms, nurtures the seeds of a future generation. Metaphorically, the solar divinities of many mythologies repeat this pattern, entering the darkness of the Underworld to await release and re-birth.

The epic hero of River also returns from the river of light to wade in a dark, Earthly, “tree-cavern river” (‘Last Night’ (R.76)): but now, his awareness of evil colours all his perceptions and he seems to move through a “dying” Underworld river of “blood”, where even the fish seem evil. Now, he becomes aware of the sickness of humanity as it impinges on the river scene, recording in ‘Gulkana’ (R.78–84) , for the first time in the sequence, the “supermarket refuse, dogs, wrecked pick-ups” that mark the presence of people in the landscape. It is as if Man, like the sacrificed god, has fallen from his heavenly paradise: as if, with enlightenment, has come knowledge of good and evil. So, the Golden world which the protagonist saw in the opening poem of River, and which has so far retained its beauty and innocence for him, is changed and appears like a strange new land. Such is the transition from innocence to experience.

The Alaskan setting of ‘Gulkana’ is, indeed, strange to the protagonist (although Hughes, himself, came to know the river well). The evils that beset the Indian village – the “stagnation”, the “cultural vasectomy”, the sterility – were evils which Hughes saw encroach on this part of Alaska (Letters.734–6) but they are evils which are common to human societies, as Remains of Elmet has eloquently shown. Now, in River, even in the familiar English river of ‘October Salmon’ (R.110–114), the protagonist sees the tragic beauty of the salmon set amidst “bicycle wheels, car-tyres, bottles / And sunk sheets of corrugated iron” and all the debris of human profligacy and waste. He sees, too, the alienation and cruelty of the children.

Nevertheless, the Gulkana has a special place in the hero’s epic journey, for it is the river in which he enters the terrifying bardo-state of illusion; a state described in sacred Buddhist texts as that which follows the experience of ‘luminosity’ and in which are

encountered demons which are projections of the human mind²¹. Prompted by the undercurrent of archaic power in the Gulkana, the protagonist begins to recognise something within himself that he “kept trying to deny”. Slowly, linking sensation and thought, imagination and rationality, he comes to acknowledge the duality within him, explaining the nagging “illusion” which dogs his steps, by personifying it as his daemon:

– one inside me,
A bodiless twin, some disinherited being
And doppelganger other, unliving,
Everliving, a larva from prehistory
Whose journey this was,
Whose gaze I could feel,... – ‘Gulkana’ (R.80).

This terrifying projection is of the wild, untamed part of himself that he constantly rejects and fears; and now he imagines its barely suppressed power as the jealous hatred of a ghostly double. Significantly, the protagonist confronts his inner self in the ethereal, alchemical and spiritual brilliance of “mercury light” (a light which is beautifully captured in the photograph on page 85), but the experience still fills him with “lucid panic”.

Wading a strange river, in a landscape which seems to shift and subside “in perpetual seismic tremor”, he turns, as he has before, to the salmon, seeking their wisdom and guidance. But they, too, seem “possessed / By the voice of the river / By its drums and flutes of its volume”, and in their eyes he no longer sees the divine spark, the scintilla of hope and renewal, but something “small, crazed, snake-like”, something chilling and remote like “a dwarf sunken sun”. The only certainties in this place are death and dissolution. This is the “revelation”, the “burden”, that the poet–persona records, “word by word”, when he re–awakens in his own familiar world of noise, machines and “incomprehension”.

Following ‘Gulkana’, Hughes exerts all his musical and poetic skill to heal the fragmentation which has occurred. The poem, ‘In the Dark Violin of the Valley’ (R.86) , fills the valley “grave” with magical music, and its vibrations and its flow re–connect the disparate elements of the world as if sewing them together. The imagery recalls that of ‘Spring–Dusk’ in *Remains of Elmet* (ROE.66) , where the drumming “witchdoctor” snipe use the “new / Needle of moon” to sew Heaven and Earth together. Now, it is the movements of a disembodied violinist that suggest a suturing surgeon: with the bow as his needle, and the music as his uniting thread, he probes, penetrates and heals the body of Earth. The reader, also, is soothed, and emotions which were disturbed by the disruptive energies of ‘Gulkana’ are drawn, by the smooth, compelling movement of Hughes’ lines, into a newly created atmosphere of harmoniously balanced tensions.

Despite the healing music, Hughes’ poet–persona still journeys through a strangely altered world. No longer is he naively enthralled by the rich honeyed mystery of the river as he was in ‘River Barrow’: instead, he sees the intemperate, voluptuousness of the Goddess, who entices him to “Copulation and death” (‘Low Water’ (R.88)). No longer is the Cormorant admired as a “deep sea diver“, expertly “Dissolving himself / Into fish, so dissolving fish naturally / Into himself” (‘A Cormorant’ (R.38)): now, it is ‘A Rival’ (R.90), a “dinosaur massacre machine”, “cancer in the lymph, uncontrollable”, “An abortion

doctor" violating the pool and leaving it "mutilated, / – Dumb and ruined".

The threatening atmosphere of decadence and evil, which the persona feels all around him, is matched by the decaying summer richness of the natural world as the Earth moves toward the Autumn equinox and night and day become of equal duration. The sun's power is at low ebb, "The fuel / Nearly all gone" (R.92), and darkness begins to engulf it (the photograph on page 89 is richly evocative of this). By "Michaelmas" ('August Evening' (R.92–94)), the "biological blaze" of the "August burn-out" (R.88) has "charred" the day-time world to a scene of cooling skeletal brittleness: and presently, the moon, "crisp" and new, begins to work its eerie magic.

The Michaelmas festival, which the "sea-tribes" of Hughes' poem (both fish and human) celebrate, is a Christian festival dedicated to the archangel Michael, who cast the Devil out of Heaven. The atmosphere which the protagonist describes in 'August Evening', however, is both religious and pagan. The influence of the moon and of the "terrible" powers of darkness (always especially feared by the Celts at the equinoxes when light and darkness struggle, as it seems, for supremacy) pervade the poem, but balancing their energies is the "religious purpose" of the fish, who forgo the "carnival" to "cobble the long pod of winter" that holds the seeds of future life. The spirit which inspires them, and which briefly creates the "white pathway" on which they and the protagonist ("I share it a little") are held in the "stilled flow" of the "unending" creative energies, is as much that of the pagan psychopomp, Lugh/Mercury, who dominated the Celtic harvest festivals at this time of year, as that of the Christian, Michael, who replaced him. This is suggested, too, in the photograph on page 93, where the mercurial glow of the sun just penetrates the mist above the blackened, eerie land, enhancing the imagery, atmosphere and meaning of this poem.

The same solar and alchemical "mercurial light" (R.98) illuminates the creatures in the poems that immediately follow 'August Evening'. In 'Last Act' (R.96) which is "performed by a male", although the Damselfly is female, it lights the "miracle-play" of love and death, from which she emerges "dripping the sun's incandescence"²². And it lights the god-like "homage" and sacrifice of the 'September Salmon' (R.98), heroically and "Famously home from sea"²³ to become "a god / A tree of sexual death, sacred with lichens" and to add his creative "daub" "To the molten palate" of transmuting energies captured in the river.

As the winter approaches and the poet-persona's world moves further into darkness, he becomes more conscious of the imminence of death and the subsequent return to an elemental state. He sees it in the mating of the Damselfly and in the purposeful gathering of sea-trout; and he sees it in the indifference and remoteness of the ancient fisherman (R.100). At the same time, he is aware of a deep undercurrent of life in the river, and this duality is expressed in the paradoxical character of the river in 'September' (R.102) and in the double nature of the eel ('An Eel' (R.104)) a primitive creature which knows, and regularly returns to, its source.

The hermaphrodite eel, in its duality, its knowledge, and its cyclical journeying around

the Earth to the spawning grounds of the Sargasso, strongly evokes the image of the cosmic snake, Uroborus. Duality and knowledge is suggested, too, by calling it “the nun of water”: which suits its “love”, its “patience”, and its annual pilgrimage to the source of its existence. ‘Nun (the fish)’, is also the fourteenth letter in the Hebrew alphabet, where it is seen as “the faithful one” – a vessel of the divine, selflessly linking heaven and earth. And ‘nun’ also invokes the Ancient Egyptian deity, Nun (Nu), symbol of chaos and the primordial ocean, and source of “all things and all beings”²⁴.

So, the promise of renewal persists until, in ‘Fairy Flood’ (R.106) , the cosmic snake becomes the river itself, the “earth–serpent with all its hoards, casting the land, like an old skin”²⁵. Like the Egyptian Nun’s flood waters bringing the annual return of chaos to the Nile Valley, the fairy flood carries everything “towards the sea”. The land “crumbles” and “melts” into emptiness, and the river’s “jubilant” energies break chaotically free.

Surrounded by such dark and riotous energies, the poet–persona (the ‘Riverwatcher’ (R.108) of the poem’s title) feels in danger of being swept along, like “a holy fool”, by the ecstatic allurements he glimpses. To protect himself, to keep his “head clear / Of the river–fetch”, he utters a prayer – a poetic charm – willing himself to concentrate and to cling “With dry difficulty” to whatever shreds of reality he can find. The immersion he fears is that of ecstatic self–absorption, such as the “Bismillah”–inspired dancer enjoys. As with the false heavens of ecstasy offered by the ‘Green Mother’ in Cave Birds (CB.40), succumbing to this temptation would entail forgoing the selfless spiritual task and accepting, instead, perpetual existence in the self–serving, vegetative cycles of regeneration. Such a choice would involve a negation of the rational mind in favour of the spirit and soul: a choice which would perpetuate the divisions in human nature rather than heal them.

Like the ‘October Salmon’ (R.110–114), the protagonist survives the flood. Looking, now, at this fellow creature with which he so strongly empathises, he sees the pathos of its “death–patched” beauty, and

The epic poise

That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so patient
In the machinery of heaven.

Watching the salmon, he is filled with the wonder and love which is expressed in this poem; and he perceives, also, the divine order in Nature. Like the “intricate and sinister pattern” (R.128: Note 115) of the dewy spider’s web on page 115, the cosmic web links everything together and everything to its source: the wonder and the horror are ever present, “inscribed” there, as it were, from the very beginning. “That is how it is”²⁶ (R.112) : and, as the poet–persona understands and acknowledges this, there comes acceptance of his own place in the pattern.

TailBiters

The regenerative cycle of the river is now almost complete. Like entwined Uroboric serpents, the “river’s twists” in ‘Visitation’ (R.116)) bite “each other’s tails”, and a star (the heavenly sign of guidance and hope) “fleetingly” illuminates the presence of a “dark

other", whose "visitation" brings a new creature out of the river. Like (yet also unlike) the river which bears it, this creature emerges in a new and extraordinary dawn, leaving the signs of its presence in the Earth—mud. It is, at once, a living river—creature and an eerie "flower" of promise from the Tree of Life.

A suggestion of the conception, annunciation and birth of the Holy Child underlies the symbolism of 'Visitation', but Hughes grounds events firmly in the world of Nature. The presence of the river; the ghost of his Otter (THCP.79) whistling and crying through the poem and leaving its "pad-clusters" in the river mud; as well as the frost-etched star-cluster of the winter cow-parsley, which lights the darkness on the page opposite the poem (R.117); all forcefully evoke the natural setting, so that the star's promise encompasses, and is demonstrated through, the world of Nature.

Not only does 'Visitation' again express Hughes' concurrence with Blake that "everything that lives is Holy" (MHH.27:chorus), it also embodies his belief that mana is manifested in all created objects and, especially, in the works of Nature. Hughes seeks to illustrate this in his own poetic creation by using natural imagery, which imaginatively merges spirit with matter, symbolism with reality, and Heaven with Earth. He also entwines his images in such a way that the 'dark other', the stars, the strange river-creature and the Tree of Life, are almost indistinguishable from the river itself. Thus, he mimics the inter-relation and flux of the cosmic energies, and achieves, through his poem, a glimpse of unity and continuance, wherein lies hope.

In 'Torridge' (R.118), Hughes continues to draw the threads of his world together. The cosmic year is nearly over, the river's annual cycle almost complete; and, as Nature's energies move towards their lowest winter ebb, Hughes begins a poetic reconciliation of contraries which will unify the disparate elements of his sequence, connect them with the cosmic Source, and complete the pattern. Flowers of "garlic" and "iris" (both species associated with the Goddess, the moon and death) are linked with the "heron" which (as in 'Whiteness' R.20) symbolises the risen Sun-god and the regeneration of life and light. The growth, pollination, withering and death of these flowers trace the annual seasonal pattern. "Venus and Jupiter", "morning star" and "evening star", fish souls and fish bodies, Adam and Eve, April and December – all these fit into the pattern, but such apparently contrary states and separate identities are peripheral to the "stillness" and constancy of the Source from which they come. Seemingly different, these elements are all connected like the strands of the cosmic web, or like the pictured "ice crystals and miniature chasms" made "At the water's edge ... as freezing and thawing alternate" (R.128:Note 119). Each is part of the universal and everlasting flux of energies that Hughes symbolises in the river.

The final poem of the River sequence, 'Salmon Eggs' (R.120–124), is, as usual, of special importance. It is Hughes' "liturgy / Of the earth's tidings" his final, clear statement of the presence on Earth of mana, the divine, 'nameless', ineffable Source. In it we hear, as we heard earlier, the music of the river – the throb of "the aorta" (R.86) that carries the spirit and blood of Earth endlessly. Now, the music is like the "toilings of psalm" that accompany holy communion with the Source of all. And in a letter to Ben

Sonnenberg, Hughes spelt out the presiding image of the poem as that of Sheila-na-gig – “literally Woman Of the Tits”.... “our oldest goddess (a death/battle/love goddess) who copulated with her consort standing astride rivers (I suppose, where she also gave birth). (A suggested scholarly correction makes her Sheila-na-gog – woman of god, God’s Wife. Gog in old Irish means God!)”, (Letters.448).

Repeating the pattern of Cave Birds and Remains of Elmet, this final poem marks both an end and a beginning. We have reached the end of a year in the river’s life, and the end of a poetic sequence. The poet-persona, too, has reached the end of his epic journey: he has heard Earth’s tidings, and his understanding of the presence of mana in Nature is demonstrated in this final poem. Yet, these endings are no more than a still point in “the nameless / Teeming inside atoms – and inside the haze / And inside the sun and inside the earth”: from this stillness new growth will come, because the river “is the font, brimming with touch and whisper / Swaddling the eggs” which now rest in the endless flow of its waters.

In its winter dormancy, the Earth itself is egg-like, resting in the albuminous “haze” of its atmosphere and nurtured by a “veined yolk of sun”. Its quiescence is reflected in the meditative mood of the poet-persona, and in the long reflective lines of the poem’s opening stanzas, their frequent vowel sounds, pauses and repetitions:

The salmon were just down there
Shuddering together, touching each other,
Emptying themselves for each other

Now beneath flood-murmur
They curve away deathwards.

January haze,
With a veined yolk of sun. In bone-damp cold
I lean and watch the water, listening to water...

In the numbing cold, the protagonist’s mind fills with images of spawning salmon in sacrificial ecstasy; and his senses expand to the sights and sounds of the river, until he loses self-awareness and “the piled flow supplants” him. His perceptions cleansed, as it were, by this flow, his imagination “blooms” like the river “mud”, to show him the “ponderous” and “everlasting” flux of energies at work in the “sliding” river. He is aware, all around him, of the “minute particulars” (MHH.14:17–19) of Nature – the wriggling catkins and the careful spider – but he sees, too, the infinite and the sacred elements of the “perfect whole”.

The wholeness of Hughes’ vision is embedded in the language of this poem, where the essence of these waters which unite life and death, temporal and eternal, sacred and profane, is compressed into oxymorons like “Mastodon ephemera” (which combines nurture and destruction: ‘mastos’ = ‘breast’; ‘odous’, ‘odontos’ = ‘tooth’); “ponderous light”; “Mud-curdling, bull-dozing”; “exhumations and delirious advents”; “More vital than death ... / ... More grave than life”; “burst crypts”; “harrowing, crowned”. There is

constant punning, too, by means of which physical and metaphysical concepts are linked. The phrase 'ponderous light', for example, conveys the weight and the brightness of the river water, and also connotes weight, thought, mind, light and enlightenment. The inter-relationship between physical reality and the metaphysical, which such punning embodies, is the fundamental message of Hughes' work: and it is summed up in the closing line of the River sequence, where "mind condenses on old haws", like the "dew that condensed of the breath of the Word" (THCP 35) at the moment of creation. Illustrating this message is Peter Keen's photograph of lit dew on a single hawthorn fruit, which is centrally placed in the pages of final poem. Not only is it a magnificent picture of condensed light, but it also reflects the wholeness which both Hughes and his protagonist have achieved. In it, life-giving light and water swathe a plump fruit of the hawthorn, which is sacred to the Goddess, thus joining her Lunar energies with those of the Sun, and uniting Earth and Heaven, Nature and Spirit, darkness and light, death and birth. Above all, at the conclusion of this river epic, the inner and outer worlds of Mankind are reconciled, Earth's tidings are heeded, and the protagonist's mind 'condenses' its knowledge by turning Earthwards to the fruits of Nature.

As a fitting conclusion to the River sequence, Keen's photograph (R.125) of the unscarred serenity of the River Exe (R.128: Note 125) beautifully demonstrates that people can work in harmony with Nature, and the lit pathway of its waters leads the imagination hopefully forward into an unknown world.

ADDENDUM: Bringing the book to life.

River was a long time in the making. In a document in the British Library, Peter Keen describes the seed of the book as being sown in 1976 when, at Carol Hughes' suggestion, he and Ted first met in Devon to go fishing together. The two men discovered that they shared a mutual understanding of the sport and this became the beginning of a long-term friendship. Some time later, Peter Keen wrote to Ted suggesting that they collaborate on a book about rivers and the associated wildlife and Ted, after seeing some of Peter's photography, liked the idea and agreed. As Peter remembered it, they were to be co-authors, each making their own separate contribution: Ted not reflecting Peter's photography and Peter not illustrating Ted's work.

In April 1978, Olwyn Hughes, acting as their agent, began negotiations with the publishers David & Charles. The intention was to produce "a really handsome book, a kind of collector's piece" with possibly a small, signed edition alongside a normal trade edition. By July, there was talk of Ted and Peter producing enough text and pictures to create a dummy book to show at the Frankfurt Book Fair later that year.

By August, negotiations with David & Charles had stalled over a dispute about the handling of American rights, and the possibility of Faber taking on the book was raised.

From 1979 until September 1982, negotiations with various publishers continued, the

main difficulty being the cost of producing a beautiful book with first-class paper and the best colour reproductions. Meanwhile, Ted was writing poems but Peter was slow in providing Olwyn with photographs to show to the publishers.

In early July 1979, it was suggested that River poems and photographs might be included in an exhibition of Ted's illustrated work to be held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in September/October. Just two photographs by Peter Keen were included in the exhibition, 'Sea Trout Rising' and 'Trout Reflection', together with a note that they were for a projected book of poems and photographs provisionally called 'River'.

That same year, the idea had been floated that Nicholas Hughes should create a dummy book, with prints, on his newly acquired Albion press. However, it was not until 1981 that he produced limited editions broadsheets of three of Ted's River poems: 'Catadrome', 'Caddis' and 'Visitation', each illustrated with drawings by Ted.

By April 1980, Ted was writing to Keith Sagar that the text for the book was "finished more or less" (Sagar, K. *Poet & Critic*, British Library, p.91), although he later wrote that the River poems were "still oozing along" (P&C.113); and in October 1982 he was still "writing and rewriting them" (P&C.120).

By May 1981, James McGibbon, who had been handling negotiation at David & Charles but had since moved to the publishers, James & James, had picked out twenty-one photographs from which transparencies had been made and a dummy book has been sent to several publishers. One had also been sent to Shell and the British Gas Company with a view to obtaining sponsorship from them. The initial response from Shell was based on the idea that the book might be a subtle way for them to demonstrate their concern for the environment. They suggested that they would require 2-3 pictures clearly demonstrating this, and that the title must be *The Shell Book of the River*. They also wanted a children's poetry competition linked to the book, and a special edition for school libraries. What they really wanted, as McGibbon noted, was prestige and a clear commercial image.

By September 1981, Faber were talking about a trade edition of the book with just a few pictures. The Observer, on the other hand, had expressed an interest in producing "a splurge edition" with magnificent photographs and "simply text". As Ted described it to Keith Sagar (P&C.95), it was to be "Not a coffee table book, but an ambassador's gift. Hugely expensive" – a book in which "nobody, who's going to buy the book, is going to read my verses. They could as well be Middle-Kingdom curses, in the original. They're just decorated with a respectable aura".

The Observer book did not eventuate but by January 1982 Faber were expressing real interest, provided a sponsor could be found; and by September that year agreement had been reached with the British Gas Corporation and a joint publication by Faber & Faber and James & James had been decided. British Gas was to select the cover photograph and to add a note making a point about their re-landscaping following the

installation of underground gas pipes. They also stipulated that the book should not be more expensive than the market was used to. The contract which was drawn up with Faber divided royalties in their customary manner for illustrated books: 75% for the text, 25% for the photographs.

At this stage, Peter Keen, who believed that he and Ted had originally agreed to a 50/50 division of royalties, objected to the contract. The situation, as Ted said when discussing *River* with me in 1995, and as he wrote to Keith Sagar in 1982 (P&C.123), had become “delicate”. Olwyn Hughes, in her capacity as agent for both Ted and Peter, was in an awkward position. She wrote to Peter that Ted had no memory of a 50/50 agreement, and that the book would sell on Ted’s name and his usual market. She pointed out that Faber decided the percentages and that even with such a famous artist as Baskin, the division was 75% for text and 25% for pictures; also that Faber advised that the only adjustable figure was Ted’s. Ultimately, Ted asked Olwyn to negotiate a 60/40 division of royalties and this was agreed.

Disappointed, and still feeling aggrieved, Peter dispensed with Olwyn’s services as his agent. In 2004, he wrote his own account of the way the book came into being at his suggestion, his memory of the agreement to co–author, and how he had always considered the book as a joint enterprise in which he and Ted each concentrated on their own individual talents. He deposited this account in the British Library.

In September 1983, *River* was published by Faber & Faber in association with James & James. It was produced in both hard–back (2,500 copies) and paper–back (15,000 copies) editions. Inside the front of the book, on the page which contains the publishing details, are the following notes:

(Under the Countryside Commission logo) The Countryside Commission is concerned to conserve and enhance the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside; and to secure public access for open–air recreation. The Commission replaced and assumed the function of the National Parks Commission when the Countryside Act became law in 1968.

(Under the British Gas logo) The British Gas Company has to ‘develop and maintain an efficient, co–ordinated and economical system of gas supply’. Because the Corporation’s major investment is in underground pipelines and rural installations, it has to achieve this primary objective with care, taking into account legislation such as the Countryside Act under which it must have regard to the desirability of conserving the natural beauty and amenity of the countryside.

Over many years, British Gas has developed a very positive attitude to conserving the natural environment, and this policy has created an atmosphere of trust among those responsible for planning in local authorities and in the communities affected. As a result British Gas has been able to introduce a gas supply system which now carries well over one third of the heat energy used in Britain. This has been built over the past twenty years with only minor impact on the countryside.

On the back of the first paperback edition is the following blurb:

This book contains and records the manifold richness which lies behind a single word – River. Two anglers, who also happen to be a great poet and a superb photographer, have pooled their resources to commemorate the eel, the otter, the trout, the stripping of salmon, the kingfisher, the heron, the cormorant, and, finally, the moving universal implications of river life. Ted Hughes's poems have all the precision of photographs: 'the water-skeeter on its abacus'. Peter Keen's photographs have all the precision of poetry. River lives in the mind like a watermark – stamped indelibly by two enormous and complementary talents. 'Published with the assistance of British Gas and the Countryside Commission'.

River Back Cover

The book is dedicated to Ted's son, Nicholas (who was also a fisherman) and to Peter Keen's wife, Andrea.

As a footnote to the whole exercise, Ted wrote to Keith Sagar (P&C.126) "I've made some bad mistakes, grafting myself onto others....I've finished with these huge tomes that won't go on a shelf & that booksellers hate & refuse to give room to after the first honeymoon. Remains of Elmet and Cave Birds have become like the Okapi in the 19th century to be found only in native legends and Hunter's memoirs".

In 1984, River was published by Harper and Row in the United States. This edition contained no photographs. The same poems were included as in the British edition but in a different order.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalConclusion

Hughes' quest for wholeness and renewal, which is reflected in his work, lasted his whole life. The Universal Energies, as they are manifested in Nature, were the constant source of his inspiration: and Nature, whose eternal rhythms and cycles link the finite and the infinite, was always his guide and his teacher. Through his dealings with her and, in particular, through his imaginative investigation of her powers and his openness to these powers, Hughes made the same epic journey towards enlightenment and wholeness as is made by the questing hero.

In the development of Hughes' poetry over the years, it is possible to trace the traditional route to enlightenment taken by the Everyman/Hero figure which Hughes adopted as a persona in Cave Birds, Remains of Elmet and River. The early poems often display an egocentricity and arrogance akin to that of the Hawk in 'Hawk Roosting'

(THCP.68). Gradually, however, the poet and the poetry become less complacent, more self-conscious and aware; and the pattern moves through the puzzled questioning of 'Wodwo' (THCP.183), into the darkness, chaos and horror of the surreal world of Crow and the Goddess-dominated torment of Gaudete, and on to the Mercurial spiritual guidance afforded in Cave Birds. The love and concern exhibited in Remains of Elmet suggests the return of a shaman to the sick world with his healing energies; and the beauty and the celebratory tone of the poems in River reflect the unity, harmony, and understanding, which are the goal of the questing soul. Appropriately, Flowers and Insects, the first published collection of poems to follow River, is a paean to Nature's infinite and omnipotent powers; a celebration of the presence of mana on Earth; and a meditation on the ephemeral embodiment of energy, spirit and light in all living things.

Since childhood, Hughes had been drawn to the natural world, and through it he was early aware of some transcendental power. Unlike the 'Romantic' poets, however, his awareness was uncompromisingly realistic, encompassing both the beauty and the horror. Yet, Hughes' earliest work reflects a lack of real involvement with the Energies and he plundered Nature's treasures to enrich and enliven his work, much as his protagonist does in the opening lines of 'Things Present' (THCP.59) in Lupercal:

All things being done or undone
As my hands adore or abandon –

Recalling his early attitude to nature in the poem 'Daffodils' (THCP.711), Hughes wrote:

I was still a nomad.
My life was still a raid.
The earth was booty.

Earth's 'gifts', at that time, like the daffodils which he plucked from his garden and sold, were used for his own profit, without any understanding of the link between their ephemeral lives and his own. In retrospect (in this poem) Hughes saw such exploitation of nature as a cruel desecration, almost a rape, of innocent but enticing creatures. But although disturbing dreams had caused him some guilt for his physical actions, he still did not relate this to his artistic pursuits.

Often, in Hughes' early poems, we do glimpse some deeper level of communication with the Energies, some indication that the poet's work is the result of more than just an awareness of the manifestation of these energies in Nature and the imaginative ability to convey this to his reader. Such glimpses constitute an imaginative re-creation of the poet's personal involvement with the Energies, and they occur when, as in 'The Thought-Fox' (THCP.21), the poem forges a link between his inner and outer worlds, so that he submits to the flow of the Energies and re-creates the experience in his poem, rather than simply describing it.

Events in Hughes' life brought him intimate knowledge of the destructive power of the natural energies. Like Prometheus, like Job, and like his own Cave Birds protagonist, he was made aware of his own subjection to more powerful forces and, in his poetry, his voice became less arrogant and controlled, and he began to use his poetry to explore

and to attempt to resolve situations in which he found himself. He used it, in effect, as a 'biological healing process'¹ – a way to achieve renewed balance and harmony. Poetry became Hughes' means of putting himself through a process which entailed personal change and growth. It was also his way of making the sacrifices necessary for a return to the Source and the attainment of mana.

Hughes' endeavours, in this respect, reflect the teaching of all gnostic texts. All maintain the importance of re-union with the Source for healing and renewal. All confirm that there is no easy way that this can be achieved: the only way is through repeated sacrifice, suffering, humility and love. This is the path that the epic heroes tread: and this is the path Hughes chose for himself. However, despite the clear influence of Eastern philosophies in some of Hughes' poetry, his path was not the Eastern mystic's path of retreat inwards, away from reality, but the very Western path of confrontation with the Energies: a confrontation which is, however, presented in Hughes' poetry as an inward journey.

Each of the poetic sequences dealt with in this book can be seen as a single, completed epic journey; but it is in Hughes' poetry as a whole that we see the process of change he underwent in his personal journey to the Source. In particular, the poetic sequences which have been examined here show the increasing freedom with which Hughes immersed himself in the flux of Energies, and the diminishing degree to which he relied on protective devices in order to do this. From the careful immersion in a traditional ritual such as Alchemy, which is seen in *Cave Birds*, Hughes' use of myth and ritual become progressively more flexible and less prescriptive, until, in *River*, it was no longer a framework which was independent of the cycles of Nature.

Only when he began to dig deeply into his own life for *Capriccio*, *Howls & Whispers* and *Birthday Letters*, did he feel again the need for a protective ritual, because, as he told Faas, when you are "dealing with the power circuit of the Universe" ritual is a "means of turning it into good, of keeping it under control. The old method is the only one"².

Another important aspect of Hughes' adoption of an Everyman/Hero protagonist or persona in his work, is the relevance of this figure to Hughes' belief in epic poetry as a shamanic journey. In *Cave Birds*, for the first time, the poet/protagonist hears the shamanic call, and experiences the trials and terrors of the journey to the otherworld. Seeing the epic hero as a shamanic archetype, able to fly to the Source to bring back healing energies, Hughes adopted the shamanic role in his work in order to fulfil altruistic, as well as purely personal, goals. Poetry, as he told Faas, is "the record of just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error"³: his stated intention, therefore, was to use his poetry as a means of negotiating with the Energies, and of channelling them into our world in order to bring us healing and enlightenment.

Orghast marked a change towards a more direct, less rationally organised, communication of Energies and ideas to his audience through their imaginative involvement in a shared, epic experience. Thus, they become participants in Hughes'

rituals. However, despite the evocative power of the poetic works through which we share Hughes' shamanic journeys, one fundamental truth of the ancient teachings bars our way: each of us, in the end, must make this journey for ourselves. Hughes may have known the path and may act as our guide, but the trials we encounter, the suffering we must endure and the choices we must make along the way are, and must essentially be, our own. Meanwhile, the imaginative power of Hughes' work can create momentary links which bring healing light and music into our darkened world.

For Hughes, like others who have undertaken this quest, the end of each stage of his journey was a return to where he began: to his belief in the immediacy and actuality of the energies of the Source in Nature and a clearer understanding of his own participation in the flux. Always, as he told Faas, "we go on writing poems because one poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed. At the end of the ritual up comes a goblin"⁴.

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Go to a discussion of the variant editions of *Cave Birds*, *River*, *Remains of Elmet*, *Elmet*, and *Three Books*.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalVariant Editions: *Cave Birds*, *River*, *Remains of Elmet*, *Elmet* and *Three Books*¹.

First published in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, Volume 2, Issue 1

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The trade edition of *Cave Birds* was published on the 2nd of September, 1978; that of *Remains of Elmet* in April 1979; and of *River* in September 1983. In 1988 I completed my doctoral thesis on the alchemical structure of these three sequences and some time in 1992 Christopher Reid, who was at that time Hughes' poetry editor at Faber & Faber, read the manuscript of my book, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, which was based on that analysis, and spoke to Ted about it. On the 18th of August that year Hughes wrote to me that "reading your book galvanized Christopher Reid into publishing *Elmet*, *Cave Birds* and *River* as a single volume". He also said that for this new book he had deleted some poems and revised others². *Three Books* was published in 1993.

In that same letter, Hughes went on to say that Faber would now do an expanded edition of *Remains of Elmet* with more photographs and more verses "mainly from other books – poems about that region, simply". *Elmet* was published in 1994.

In conversation with me shortly after *Elmet* appeared, Hughes, in his usual generous way, expressed concern that his alteration of the sequencing and the content of both *Remains of Elmet* and *River* might negate some of the ways I had interpreted the

sequences in my book. He was also anxious to know what I thought of the new Elmet, which was very similar to the sequencing and poems he had chosen for Three Books, and whether the changes bothered me. I replied that I thought Elmet was quite different to Remains of Elmet: that he seemed to have had a quite different purpose for it, and that in it he seemed to be laying something to rest, completing something. I remember commenting that the final photograph in the new book, with its large, carefully placed graveyard cross, was like a benediction: R.I.P. Hughes' response to this was a heart-felt sighed "Yes!"³.

That Hughes' purpose and his choice of poems and sequencing changed between the original trade editions and the later publication of Three Books and Elmet was not surprising. Cave Birds, which step-by-step followed the stages of an alchemical process and which was put together, as Hughes told Roberts and Gifford, "as deliberately as a clock"⁴, remained unchanged in Three Books, but whilst there was an underlying, transformative, alchemical theme in Remains of Elmet and River, the alchemy was in the poems and the photographs themselves and in the cyclical patterns of nature. Ted still chose the first and last poems of the new sequences with his customary care, and often, especially in River, he paired the poems so that a 'downbeat' poem (to use his own terminology) was immediately followed by an 'upbeat poem'. The ethereal beauty of 'Ophelia'⁵, for example, counters the physical horrors described in '1984 On 'The Tarka Trail' '⁶.

This careful concern for the balance of energies in his sequences is apparent, too, in the letter Hughes wrote to Christopher Reid when he first began rearranging the poems for Three Books. 'Be a Dry-Fly Purist', which beautifully conflates a particularly controlled method of fishing with the careful process of capturing poems, was to have been followed by 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning', which, Hughes wrote, describes the "poacher's approach". So, the deliberate, socially required, learned precision, which is the theme of the first, was to have been balanced by the earthy, natural, instinctive energies of the second. "An all rounder", in fishing and poetry, Hughes commented, "has to be master of all the methods that produce the goods and the thrill"⁷. In the end, the poem which followed 'Be a Dry-Fly Purist'⁸ in Three Books was 'A Rival'⁹, which describes not a human poacher but a creature of Nature responding to the demands of Nature – a cormorant, a raider, a programmed "massacre-machine". No human poacher could match its in-born skill, and that Hughes should have considered it 'a rival' also suggests much about the way he viewed his own raids on the river of his subconscious when he was writing poems.

The River sequence in Three Books begins, in 'Salmon Eggs' ¹⁰, with a natural prelude to birth and renewal, rather than with the artificial human intervention in this process which is described in 'The Morning Before Christmas' ¹¹. The poems no longer follow the cycle of the year, nine poems have been dropped and thirteen added, seven of which were previously unpublished. There is less light and magic and more darkness in the River sequence in Three Books but still it ends with the uplifting blessing and enlightenment of 'That Morning' ¹², which, as the final poem in the book would have been chosen by Hughes with special care.

The changes between the original sequence of poems in the trade edition of *Remains of Elmet* and the sequences in *Three Books* and *Elmet* are more radical. Eighteen of the *Remains of Elmet* poems were dropped and the sequence was substantially re-ordered for *Three Books*. This re-ordering remained largely intact for *Elmet* but eighteen poems (fourteen from earlier books and four previously unpublished) were inserted, together with a number of new photographs. Only four photographs were dropped.

The reason for these changes, and for the very different moods and purposes of *Remains of Elmet* and *Elmet*, are apparent in letters which Ted wrote to a number of his friends. Before beginning to work on *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes wrote to Fay Godwin about the changes in the landscape of the Elmet area and of the way the “primaeval reality of the region” was “taking over again” as the people of his mother’s generation and everything about their history and their way of life died out. “If only some of that could be captured in photographs”, he wrote. And he also wanted to capture something of the feeling of freedom he had felt when hunting on the moors with his older brother, Gerald: “something”, as he said, of that “great feeling that you were utterly free and alone”¹³.

Hughes was aware, however, that his own feelings about the area were problematic. “I know I do have an immense amount locked up in all that”, he told Godwin. “At times it is overwhelming when I try to release it”. And writing to Glyn Hughes shortly after the publication of *Remains of Elmet*, he was even more blunt about these feelings, describing them as “not quite hatred but something pretty sour”¹⁴. Later, writing to Ben Sonnenberg, he described how, digging down through his own “strata” as he wrote the poems, he had found “dislike, dread, even hatred”, and so he had “skidded off” and “borrowed” his mother’s feelings, which were, “more suitable” for what he wanted from the book. His mother, he said, “had the right tribal allegiances to the Holy Ground and the magical dead”¹⁵.

Hughes was well aware, therefore, that *Remains of Elmet* grew mostly from “what my mother felt about it [*Elmet*] when I was about 5”¹⁶, and he knew that he had shelved his own mixed feelings about this place in which he had lived the early, most formative years of his childhood. He told Glyn Hughes that he had been thinking he ought to write “something supplementary” in order to remedy this. And in his letter to Ben Sonnenberg in 1981, he said that he would like “to try seriously, before time overtakes” to deal with his own feelings about *Elmet*¹⁷. *Elmet*, with the re-ordered poems and photographs, and with the inclusion of many more personal poems about himself and his family, was his attempt to do this.

Yet, the process of rewriting and re-ordering the poems was not easy. In June 1985, Ted wrote to Keith Sagar, “The rewriting had been head-in-sack drudgery. It is the sort of book I should have written in my twenties, when my feelings about the place were still innocent and unspoiled and fairly simple”¹⁸. And in a letter to Leonard Baskin on August 15th, 1984, he described rewriting *Elmet* as “a brick wall style project. The brick wall being the door to the family tomb, I suppose.”¹⁹. “Everything that dies”, he went on,

“is a goblin that carries away pieces of your brain”. And for the artist, the only cure for this “lobotomy by bereavement” is “resurrection, release of the goblins, reclamation of the goblins”.

No wonder Ted’s relief when Elmet was finally published was clear in his response to my comments on the final photograph. Yet, although he once described Elmet as his “definitive Calder Valley collection”²⁰, he was not happy with it. Looking back on the re-writing shortly before he died, he told Keith Sagar: “Of Elmet’s three orderings [Remains of Elmet, Three Books and Elmet]: only the first works! That was Fay’s – with maybe a nudge or two here and there from me”. He was aware that his own aims and Fay’s style of photographs changed between the publication of Remains of Elmet and Elmet, and “because of the coming and going” he “never got the text, let alone the order of it” that he wanted. “I feel”, he wrote, “that I let Fay down, somewhat, except for that first time round”²¹.

NOTES

1. Ted Hughes: Collected Poems, Faber, 2003, has not been included in this discussion, because Hughes did not choose the order of the poems for that collection and there are, in any case, some errors. ‘Two Photographs at Top Withens’, for example, is included amongst ‘Uncollected’ poems on page 840, although a note on page 1299 indicates that the text is from Elmet and the poem was first published in Three Books.
2. Unpublished letter, Hughes to Ann Skea. British Library manuscript. Add 74257.
3. Skea, Diary/Notebook 1994. British Library, Dep. 10515.
4. Hughes to Roberts and Gifford, 19 October 1978. Reid, C. (Ed.) Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. p.395.
5. Hughes, Three Books, Faber, 1993. p.122.
6. Three Books. pp.118-121.
7. Hughes to Reid, 21 June 1992. Letters, pp.612-3.
8. Three Books. p.123.
9. Three Books. p.124.
10. Three Books. p.105.
11. Hughes, ‘River’, Faber, 1983. p.9. This was the opening poem of the 1983 Faber edition of River. The order of poems in the American edition published by Harper and Row, NY, 1984. was different again and I have not examined this edition.
12. Three Books. pp. 178-9.
13. Hughes to Godwin, 4 July 1976. Letters. pp. 378-380.
14. Hughes to Glyn Hughes, [November 1979]. Letters. p.430.
15. Hughes to Sonnenberg, 30 May 1981. Letters. pp.447-8.
16. Ibid. p. 430.
17. Letters. p. 448.
18. Unpublished letter, Hughes to Sagar. British Library Add.78757.
19. Unpublished letter. Hughes to Baskin, British Library. Add.83684.
20. Gifford: Interview with Fay Godwin, Thumbscrew, 18 Spring 2001.
21. Unpublished letter, Hughes to Sagar, British Library. Add. 78756. 14 Oct. 1998.

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Abbreviations and Bibliography
For convenience the following works are referred to in the text by the abbreviation shown, followed by the relevant page number or, in the case of Blake's works, by the Plate number and line number as shown in *The Illuminated Blake*, annotated by David Erdman, (Anchor Press, 1974).

Works by Ted Hughes:

ASN. Adam and the Sacred Nine (Rainbow Press, 1979).
BL. Birthday Letters (Faber 1998).
CB. Cave Birds (Faber, 1979).
ED. Drafts of Cave Birds held at The University of Exeter.
G. Gaudete (Faber 1977).
HIR. Hawk in the Rain (Faber 1968).
L. Lupercal (Faber 1970).
ME-1. 'Myth and Education' in *Children's Literature in Education I* (APS March 1970) pp.55-70.
ME-2. 'Myth and Education' in *Writers, Critics and Children*, Fox, Hammond, Jones. Smith, and Sterck (eds). (Heinemann, 1976).
M. Moortown (Faber 1979).
PIM. Poetry in the Making (Faber 1969).
R. River (Faber 1983).
ROE. Remains of Elmet (Faber 1979) SP. Selected Poems 1957-1981 (Faber 1982).
SS. Season Songs (Faber 1979).
THCP. Ted Hughes Collected Poems (Faber 2003).
W. Wodwo (Faber 1971).
WITT. What Is The Truth (Faber 1984).
WP. Winter Pollen, W.Scammell (ed.), (Faber 1994).

Works by William Blake:

Eu. Europe.
Jer. Jerusalem.
Job. Illustrations of the Book of Job, Bold, A. (ed), (Paddington Press, 1976).
MHH. The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.

Mil. Milton

Works by C.G. Jung:

MC. *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, (Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1974).

PA. *Psychology and Alchemy*, (Princeton University Press, 1980).

Other works:

O. Smith, A.C., *Orghast at Persepolis* (Eyre and Methuen, 1972).

Faas. Faas, E., *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Black Sparrow, 1980).

ATH. Sagar, K., *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester University Press, 1983).

Sagar, K., *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge University Press, 1978).

Scigaj. Scigaj, L. *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* (University of Iowa Press, 1986).

British Library Manuscripts:

Sloane ms. 317. The translation into English of some of the work of Albertus Magnus, Folio. 99–99B.

Sloane ms. 3734. Printed book entitled *The Mirror of Alchemy* by Roger Bacon, Quarto, London 1597.

Add.ms. 2405. *Roger Bacon's Mirror of Alchemy*, XVII century. Folio. 39–476.

Add.ms. 320. XVI lent. Notes gathered out of the Testament of Arnoldus Philosophicus, Folio. 32.b –33.B.

Add.ms. 630. A translation of Arnold de Villa Nova's alchemical treatise, *Practica*, printed in Latin in the *Theatrum Chymicum*, volume III, page 137, Folio. 98–116.

Add.ms. 3,506. Folio. 1 32. Alchemical tracts by A de Villa Nova, XVIII century.

Add.ms. 317. 1600, Raymondus Lullius his *Elucidaric*; in English, Fo. 45–56B.

Add.ms. 640. XVIII, Collection of alchemical receipts and observations partly taken from Arnoldus de Villa Nova and Isaac Holland: in English and Latin, Folio. 352–402.

Add.ms. 3732. XVII c.pap. A collection of chemical works by George Ripley. Folio. 1–97.

Add.ms. 716. XVIIc. A small book of Artephrus called *The Great Key of Wisdom*, a translation of Artefuus, *Artefii Arabis Philosophi liber secretus*.

Add.ms. 3676. Translations in English of a book entitled *Cabala*, the looking Glass of Art and Nature in Alchemy by Leonard Thurneiser, Fo. 1–35 and XVII.c. pap.

Add.ms. 3685. *The Roseyarde or Rosarie of the Philosophers*, Englished by John Arondell, 1601, Fo. 1–50.

Add.ms. 320. Extracts from some alchemical tracts entitled *The Serpent and the Dragon*, XVI.c.

The bibliographic details of all other works consulted are referenced in the text.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and 'Astrological Conundrums'

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'Those supernatural seeming dreams, full of conflict and authority and unearthly states of feeling, were projections of man's inner and outer world'.

('Myth and Education', Winter Pollen p.138)

Myths, Hughes wrote, are stories which 'attract and light up everything relevant in our experience'. Every story 'is an acquisition, a kind of wealth' and if it becomes familiar 'any fragment of the story serves as a 'word' by which the whole story's electric circuit is switched into consciousness, and all the light and power brought to bear' (WP 139-141). For centuries, we humans have woven stories around the planets, stars and constellations of stars in our skies. For the earliest peoples, the appearance in the northern skies of the prominent constellation which they identified as 'Taurus, The Bull' heralded the beginning of spring, renewal and regeneration. In the southern hemisphere, the Australian Aborigines identify the dark nebulae clouds of the Milky Way as a dark emu, and its movement across the sky is their guide for the hunting out and eating of emu eggs¹. Everywhere, the stars have always been used for navigation on sea and on land, and the stories associated with them have been used as mnemonics for recognizing their shapes and importance.

There is a long-standing belief, too, that the images and symbols associated with the stars, especially those linked to gods, will, as with religious icons, connect us with divine creative/destructive energies². All this, I believe, lies beneath the puzzles of Hughes's 'Astrological Conundrums', and the clue lies in the astrological notation which Hughes inscribed at the end of the poem when he gave it, in an early copy of the first American edition of *Wolfwatching*, to his friend Roy Davids at Christmas 1990.

This is what Hughes wrote at the end of the poem:

Astrological Symbols

In astrological symbols this says that Jupiter is in conjunction with Mars and opposed to Saturn³. The sky chart below shows that this is the position of those planets in the sky over Mytholmroyd on Sunday 17 August 1930 at 1 a.m., the exact time of Hughes's birth (I will return to my proof of this time later). It also shows the position of the Moon and of some of the other constellations which were in the sky above Mytholmroyd at that time.

Birth Sky symbols

The second sky-map (below) shows the mythological figures whose stories we, in the northern hemisphere, have traditionally associated with those planets and with the Moon and those other constellations.

Mythological Sky

The Moon is high in the sky and she, with Jupiter and Mars oppose their powerful

energies to those of Saturn, who ruled the sky before being deposed by his son, Jupiter. Saturn, in the poem Hughes wrote for the christening of Prince William in 1982, is always the dispenser of firm judgment. For him, 'balance' is the 'true dance' of the solar system. Although Jupiter now 'occupies heaven's throne', he still acknowledges his 'wise father', but the 'old enmity' which exists between them, and their opposition in Hughes's birth-chart, are astrologically significant for events in Hughes's life⁴. Significant, too, is the fact that in astrology Jupiter is ruler of the constellations of Pisces – the fish which for Hughes were so important – and of Sagittarius, the centaur, who, before the discovery of the planet Chiron in 1977, was believed to have shamanic powers and was known to astrologers as the 'wounded healer'.

The Moon, ('throned Queen' of the sky) would be regarded by astrologers as ruler of Hughes's birth-chart. She is the goddess whose destructive/creative powers pervade Hughes's work and whose animals – cats, great and small – are the tigers, jaguars, lion, and puma of which Hughes wrote, as well as the 'foxy-furry' tailed kitten and the battered 'tabby tom' of his poem 'Pets' (CP 351). Inana/Juno

Here she is as the ancient Mesopotamian goddess, Inana, riding her lion; and as Roman Juno with her cat at her feet:

All these cats are present in Hughes's poems and there is a tiger in his story 'The Guardian' which is created by God's witch-mother from the crescent moon⁵. There is also a young boy's dream tiger, into which the boy seems slowly to turn, in Hughes's children's story *The Tiger Boy*⁶. But the tiger and the mountain lion which featured in one of Hughes's own dreams, and which he recorded in his dream diary, are especially pertinent to the first poem of 'Astrological Conundrums'.

'Distance from Dream is Distance from the real operation', Hughes wrote in this dream diary⁷. And on December 28th 1988, he recorded 'horrible dreams. Hideous and Horror' in which he 'shot through the letter box, a tiger that was peering in – turned out I had killed a big female mountain lion. My guide'. Here is one of the creatures – 'my beasts' as he sometimes calls them in this dream diary – which he regarded as his shamanic guides⁸.

The first poem of 'Astrological Conundrums', 'The Fool's Evil Dream', is very much a shamanic poem in which the fool, like the imbecile innocent in *Cave Birds* ('The Scream' CP 419 and 'In These Fading Moments' CP 423–4), is 'just walking about' in the gloom which represents his unenlightened state, when 'a glowing beast – a tigress' smelling of nature's beauties, accosts him. The tigress then offers him a Faustian bargain: feed himself to her and he will become 'The never-dying god'. Here is the shamanic call. For the shaman, dying (known as 'becoming the skeleton'), flying to the otherworld and being reborn, is part of the ritual journey which endows him or her with god-like healing powers. In the poem, the fool does fly with the tigress, is dissolved in 'the internal powers of tiger', and is reborn, but his 'sudden cry of terror', an 'infant's cry', suggests not only his rebirth but also that he is not yet mature or courageous enough to 'feed himself to her' completely, as did the 'very holy man' she had described to him. So, the

'bright spirit' (the tigress) goes away 'weeping'.

The Goddess is fickle and cruel and demands complete submission. In his Vacana notebook, Hughes wrote of his Lady of the Hill: 'your punishments are scars / The signature / of your ownership'. He also wrote 'before I shaved myself / you carried me / through womb after womb'⁹. The path to becoming a shaman who has the maturity and strength to channel the healing energies of the Goddess requires many rebirths.

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The final poem, ambiguously titled 'Tell', is the dream of that shaman. The protagonist of this poem is closely linked to Hughes himself, who was a half-blue in archery at Cambridge University. He dreams that he is suddenly armed with his 'old steel bow'. And his description of the bow as 'a harp frame / So perfectly strung it seemed

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This element of close personal danger is also suggested in the title 'Tell', which brings to mind the legendary Swiss archer, William Tell, who, in the cause of individual and political freedom, was condemned, with his son, to die unless he shot an apple off his son's head with a single arrow. He, too, must have hesitated with all his might.

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Both Hughes's unfinished Crow epic and his *Birthday Letters* poems were part of his quest for healing and wholeness. There is evidence on a fragment of paper amongst Hughes's dream diary manuscripts that he intended to complete the Crow story using, as in *Birthday Letters*, a Cabbalistic framework. On a scrap of paper, in large black letters, is written 'Seek Shekinah' and, underlined, 'plot the whole sequence'. At the side of the sheet is written, and starred, 'Tithonus and his bride / Crow meets God as a cicada / Chokmah and song for a phallus'¹⁷. Also mentioned are the fool, the guide, and the guardian who 'sends him signs'. Commenting on a dream on 15 November 1983, Hughes wrote 'I'm writing the complete Crow'. He then noted: 'two weeks ago I started, and every time I move to anything else ... my beasts begin to agitate and protest'.

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Two other aspects of Hughes's birth-chart, although unrelated to 'Astrological Conundrums', should be mentioned.

The first is the presence, close enough to Saturn to share his energies, of the constellation of Ophiuchus, the double-natured snake which is endlessly wrested by Asclepius, the god of healing, whose father was Apollo, and who was taught by the shamanic centaur, Chiron. Ophiuchus would turn up in Hughes's life whenever he seemed to be making progress. He wrote to Sagar of the 'months and years in which he had yielded to it' and how 'it always appeared, to the day, when I had at last managed to take a real step' (LTH 338). And to William Scammell he wrote of the 'perverse interruptions, the difficulties, tempting diversions and sheer obstacular accidents' caused by this 'Great Snake' (LTH 648-9). In his poem, 'Ophiuchos' (CP 574), he links it with images of horror, although, as he told Sagar, 'he wasn't always ugly'¹⁹.

The second significant constellation in Hughes's birth-sky is the constellation of Gemini – The Twins. Closely linked in the sky with Mars and Jupiter, this was a constellation of which Hughes was particularly aware. The story of the Gemini twins, Castor and Polydeuces, as Robert Graves tells it, is closely linked with their ongoing wars with another set of twins over the daughters of King Leukippos²⁰. In a rare moment of

reconciliation, the four men mount a cattle raid on Arcadia (the Paradisal place of harmony with Nature) but in a quarrel over the division of spoils Castor, the mortal Gemini twin, was killed. Polydeuces, the immortal twin, was distraught and pleaded with his father, Zeus, to make him mortal so that he might also die and never be parted from his brother. In reward for their brotherly love, Zeus set their images among the stars as the constellation of Gemini.

In Hughes's dream diary and in his work he writes frequently of his 'other', of ghostly doubles and of rival brothers. In 'The Gulkana' (CP 665–6) he 'felt hunted' by something he explains to himself as 'one inside me, / A bodiless twin, some unloving doppelganger / Disinherited other, unloving / Ever-living'. But in 'Two' (RE 80) the astrological link with Gemini is particularly startling. There Hughes and his brother are the Two who 'stepped down from the morning star', which is Jupiter in early mythologies. Coming 'with long shadows / Between the dawn's fingers', they 'dropped from the woods that hung in the sky' with their booty of poached animals 'robbed of their jewels'. Then 'war opened' and one 'flew up from the pathway // The other stood still'. In a letter to me, Hughes wrote that "Two" is simply about my brother and myself. He was ten years older than me and made my early life a kind of paradise ... which was ended abruptly by the war. He joined the RAF, and after the war he came to Australia, ... The closing of Paradise is a big event'²¹.

To return to the exact nature of Hughes's birth-chart and the time of his birth:

In 2017 I spent days at the British Library looking through Hughes's dream diary and other manuscripts for the dream he describes in 'Astrological Conundrums'. There were dreams of his shamanic guides, his beasts, his 'keeper', and one starred dream of 'going for a walk with some other' and having a 'large beautiful wolf' – a great 'golden wolf' – which gambols around his feet then walks behind him with its paws on his shoulders. Hughes comments that 'He has never been so close or so generous with himself'. There are also magnificent dreams of fish and fishing. And there was one dream in which he slept with the Queen. But I didn't find the dream about aiming an arrow at the Raven's eye. As I packed up my manuscript tray at 4.30pm on my last day at the library, I riffled through an old desk diary which I had examined earlier and which Hughes had begun to recycle for notes. Amongst what had appeared to be a large block of blank pages in the middle of the book, I found Hughes's own account of the night of his birth.

'I was born within a few minutes of one a.m. – of the clock striking one in the morning'²², Hughes wrote. And he described how on 17th August 1930, 'a Sunday', his father had gone on his bike to fetch the midwife. As he returned across the river just below their house, the 'Wesleyan clock' had struck one in the morning and when he got home Hughes was just born. At the time of his birth his mother had been watching a bright star through the window which Hughes identified as the planet 'Jupiter rising in 11 Cancer'. He then recorded the exact position in the sky of 'Mars in 22nd Gemini', the Moon 'above again in 17 Taurus' and that 'she could not see Saturn sitting opposite in the West'.

He also wrote that his mother had told him that when she was carrying him 'she repeatedly had the sensation of meeting someone as she went through doorways'. So strong was this sensation that 'she frequently stopped in her tracks'²³.

So, we know exactly what the sky looked like above Mytholmroyd at the moment of Hughes's birth, and it is clear that the energies of the mythological figures which appeared there were, over a lifetime, channeled into his work. Perhaps, too, his mother's story about feeling an attendant, invisible presence during her pregnancy with him was the source of his interest in twins and ghostly doubles.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzFYFutiwoA>
2. See my discussion of the importance of images and symbols in Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition. Also available in the Ted Hughes Society Journal, Vol. VI Issue I, 2017.
3. This inscribed copy of Wolfwatching is held at Pembroke College, Cambridge University. My thanks to Pembroke College and to Carol Hughes for permission to reproduce this image.
4. Ted Hughes, 'A Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown', in George Mackay Brown, (ed.) Four Poets for St. Magnus (Stromness, Orkney: Breckness Press 1987). This poem describes Prince William's horoscope in detail and takes the form of a Court Masque in which the Prince's astrological 'high godparents' gather round his cradle and each speaks according to their particular mythological and astrological character, offering advice and gifts. A Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown
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6. Ted Hughes, *The Tiger Boy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016).
7. British Library, Add Ms 88918/29/10, Diary entry for April 16, 1984.
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9. Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes's Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom*
10. 'Awake!' is discussed in detail in Ann Skea, *Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama*
11. Ted Hughes's essay 'Your World' in *The Observer Magazine*, 29 November 1992.

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12. Neil Roberts, Ted Hughes: A Literary Life (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan 2006). p.173.

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<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A51767.0001.001/1:10?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.

14. Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980). p.207.

15. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, Ted Hughes: A Critical Study (London: Faber 1981). p.256.

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17. Shekinah, in Cabbala, is the 'quasi-independent', exiled, female aspect of God and 'the sphere of Shekina [is] the dwelling place of the soul'. She is the primordial mother, linked with the moon, and her exile due to human sin is 'sometimes represented as the banishment of the queen or of the king's daughter by her husband or father'. The task of the Cabbalist is to work to expiate that sin, end her exile, and seal this with a sacred marriage which reunites the female and male aspects of God. These quotations are from Gershom Scholem's detailed discussion of Shekinah in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken 1996). pp.135–157. Chokmah, otherwise known as 'Wisdom' and 'The All Father', is Sephira 2 on the Cabbalists' Tree of Life where it represents one of the aspects of Divine energy manifest in our world.

18. British Library, Add. Mss 88918/12/9

19. Hughes to Keith Sagar, September/October 1973 (LTH 338); Hughes to William Scammell, 2 October 1993 (LTH 648–9).

20. Rober Graves, *Greek Myths* (London: Cassell 1981) pp. 72–3.

21. Ann Skea, Ted Hughes: *The Poetic Quest* (Armidale: UNE Press 1994). p.200.

22. When constructing a birth-chart, astrologers adjust the time of birth to accord with Universal Time. 'A few minutes after one a.m.', for Hughes's birth date, therefore becomes approximately 12.05 a.m. which in a letter to Ben Sonnenberg, quoted by Diane Middlebrook in *Her Husband* (N.Y. Viking 2003) p. 51, Hughes called 'solar midnight'. In a letter to Olwyn Hughes, 23 February 1957 (THL 94) he also notes the time and the positions of Jupiter 'on the cusp of the fifth', 'near my Moon' and 'Moon opposite my ascendant'.

23. Add.Mss. 88918/10/17. 1970 Collins Desk Diary. These notes are written

upside-down on the pages for December 22-31.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and 'Astrological Conundrums'

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'Those supernatural seeming dreams, full of conflict and authority and unearthly states of feeling, were projections of man's inner and outer world'.

('Myth and Education', Winter Pollen p.138)

Myths, Hughes wrote, are stories which 'attract and light up everything relevant in our experience'. Every story 'is an acquisition, a kind of wealth' and if it becomes familiar 'any fragment of the story serves as a 'word' by which the whole story's electric circuit is switched into consciousness, and all the light and power brought to bear' (WP 139-141). For centuries, we humans have woven stories around the planets, stars and constellations of stars in our skies. For the earliest peoples, the appearance in the northern skies of the prominent constellation which they identified as 'Taurus, The Bull' heralded the beginning of spring, renewal and regeneration. In the southern hemisphere, the Australian Aborigines identify the dark nebulae clouds of the Milky Way as a dark emu, and its movement across the sky is their guide for the hunting out and eating of emu eggs¹. Everywhere, the stars have always been used for navigation on sea and on land, and the stories associated with them have been used as mnemonics for recognizing their shapes and importance.

There is a long-standing belief, too, that the images and symbols associated with the stars, especially those linked to gods, will, as with religious icons, connect us with divine creative/destructive energies². All this, I believe, lies beneath the puzzles of Hughes's 'Astrological Conundrums', and the clue lies in the astrological notation which Hughes inscribed at the end of the poem when he gave it, in an early copy of the first American edition of *Wolfwatching*, to his friend Roy Davids at Christmas 1990.

This is what Hughes wrote at the end of the poem:

Astrological Symbols

In astrological symbols this says that Jupiter is in conjunction with Mars and opposed to Saturn³. The sky chart below shows that this is the position of those planets in the sky over Mytholmroyd on Sunday 17 August 1930 at 1 a.m., the exact time of Hughes's birth (I will return to my proof of this time later). It also shows the position of the Moon and of some of the other constellations which were in the sky above Mytholmroyd at that time.

Birth Sky symbols

The second sky-map (below) shows the mythological figures whose stories we, in the northern hemisphere, have traditionally associated with those planets and with the Moon and those other constellations.

Mythological Sky

The Moon is high in the sky and she, with Jupiter and Mars oppose their powerful energies to those of Saturn, who ruled the sky before being deposed by his son, Jupiter. Saturn, in the poem Hughes wrote for the christening of Prince William in 1982, is always the dispenser of firm judgment. For him, 'balance' is the 'true dance' of the solar system. Although Jupiter now 'occupies heaven's throne', he still acknowledges his 'wise father', but the 'old enmity' which exists between them, and their opposition in Hughes's birth-chart, are astrologically significant for events in Hughes's life⁴. Significant, too, is the fact that in astrology Jupiter is ruler of the constellations of Pisces – the fish which for Hughes were so important – and of Sagittarius, the centaur, who, before the discovery of the planet Chiron in 1977, was believed to have shamanic powers and was known to astrologers as the 'wounded healer'.

The Moon, ('throned Queen' of the sky) would be regarded by astrologers as ruler of Hughes's birth-chart. She is the goddess whose destructive/creative powers pervade Hughes's work and whose animals – cats, great and small – are the tigers, jaguars, lion, and puma of which Hughes wrote, as well as the 'foxy-furry' tailed kitten and the battered 'tabby tom' of his poem 'Pets' (CP 351). Inana/Juno

Here she is as the ancient Mesopotamian goddess, Inana, riding her lion; and as Roman Juno with her cat at her feet:

All these cats are present in Hughes's poems and there is a tiger in his story 'The Guardian' which is created by God's witch-mother from the crescent moon⁵. There is also a young boy's dream tiger, into which the boy seems slowly to turn, in Hughes's children's story *The Tiger Boy*⁶. But the tiger and the mountain lion which featured in one of Hughes's own dreams, and which he recorded in his dream diary, are especially pertinent to the first poem of 'Astrological Conundrums'.

'Distance from Dream is Distance from the real operation', Hughes wrote in this dream diary⁷. And on December 28th 1988, he recorded 'horrible dreams. Hideous and Horror' in which he 'shot through the letter box, a tiger that was peering in – turned out I had killed a big female mountain lion. My guide'. Here is one of the creatures – 'my beasts' as he sometimes calls them in this dream diary – which he regarded as his shamanic guides⁸.

The first poem of 'Astrological Conundrums', 'The Fool's Evil Dream', is very much a shamanic poem in which the fool, like the imbecile innocent in *Cave Birds* ('The Scream' CP 419 and 'In These Fading Moments' CP 423–4), is 'just walking about' in the gloom which represents his unenlightened state, when 'a glowing beast – a tigress' smelling of

nature's beauties, accosts him. The tigress then offers him a Faustian bargain: feed himself to her and he will become 'The never-dying god'. Here is the shamanic call. For the shaman, dying (known as 'becoming the skeleton'), flying to the otherworld and being reborn, is part of the ritual journey which endows him or her with god-like healing powers. In the poem, the fool does fly with the tigress, is dissolved in 'the internal powers of tiger', and is reborn, but his 'sudden cry of terror', an 'infant's cry', suggests not only his rebirth but also that he is not yet mature or courageous enough to 'feed himself to her' completely, as did the 'very holy man' she had described to him. So, the 'bright spirit' (the tigress) goes away 'weeping'.

The Goddess is fickle and cruel and demands complete submission. In his Vacana notebook, Hughes wrote of his Lady of the Hill: 'your punishments are scars / The signature / of your ownership'. He also wrote 'before I shaved myself / you carried me / through womb after womb'⁹. The path to becoming a shaman who has the maturity and strength to channel the healing energies of the Goddess requires many rebirths.

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On the walls and battens of Hughes's writing hut when he died, with their exact position carefully noted by Carol Hughes, were sheets of notes and lists charting a Crow epic which begins with his birth and ends (possibly) with 'Stone egg hatching' a 'human baby inside'¹⁸.

Two other aspects of Hughes's birth-chart, although unrelated to 'Astrological Conundrums', should be mentioned.

The first is the presence, close enough to Saturn to share his energies, of the constellation of Ophiuchus, the double-natured snake which is endlessly wrested by Asclepius, the god of healing, whose father was Apollo, and who was taught by the shamanic centaur, Chiron. Ophiuchus would turn up in Hughes's life whenever he seemed to be making progress. He wrote to Sagar of the 'months and years in which he had yielded to it' and how 'it always appeared, to the day, when I had at last managed to take a real step' (LTH 338). And to William Scammell he wrote of the 'perverse interruptions, the difficulties, tempting diversions and sheer obstacular accidents'

caused by this 'Great Snake' (LTH 648–9). In his poem, 'Ophiuchos' (CP 574), he links it with images of horror, although, as he told Sagar, 'he wasn't always ugly'¹⁹.

The second significant constellation in Hughes's birth-sky is the constellation of Gemini – The Twins. Closely linked in the sky with Mars and Jupiter, this was a constellation of which Hughes was particularly aware. The story of the Gemini twins, Castor and Polydeuces, as Robert Graves tells it, is closely linked with their ongoing wars with another set of twins over the daughters of King Leukippos²⁰. In a rare moment of reconciliation, the four men mount a cattle raid on Arcadia (the Paradisal place of harmony with Nature) but in a quarrel over the division of spoils Castor, the mortal Gemini twin, was killed. Polydeuces, the immortal twin, was distraught and pleaded with his father, Zeus, to make him mortal so that he might also die and never be parted from his brother. In reward for their brotherly love, Zeus set their images among the stars as the constellation of Gemini.

In Hughes's dream diary and in his work he writes frequently of his 'other', of ghostly doubles and of rival brothers. In 'The Gulkana' (CP 665–6) he 'felt hunted' by something he explains to himself as 'one inside me, / A bodiless twin, some unloving doppelganger / Disinherited other, unloving / Ever-living'. But in 'Two' (RE 80) the astrological link with Gemini is particularly startling. There Hughes and his brother are the Two who 'stepped down from the morning star', which is Jupiter in early mythologies. Coming 'with long shadows / Between the dawn's fingers', they 'dropped from the woods that hung in the sky' with their booty of poached animals 'robbed of their jewels'. Then 'war opened' and one 'flew up from the pathway // The other stood still'. In a letter to me, Hughes wrote that "Two" is simply about my brother and myself. He was ten years older than me and made my early life a kind of paradise ... which was ended abruptly by the war. He joined the RAF, and after the war he came to Australia, ... The closing of Paradise is a big event'²¹.

To return to the exact nature of Hughes's birth-chart and the time of his birth:

In 2017 I spent days at the British Library looking through Hughes's dream diary and other manuscripts for the dream he describes in 'Astrological Conundrums'. There were dreams of his shamanic guides, his beasts, his 'keeper', and one starred dream of 'going for a walk with some other' and having a 'large beautiful wolf' – a great 'golden wolf' – which gambols around his feet then walks behind him with its paws on his shoulders. Hughes comments that 'He has never been so close or so generous with himself'. There are also magnificent dreams of fish and fishing. And there was one dream in which he slept with the Queen. But I didn't find the dream about aiming an arrow at the Raven's eye. As I packed up my manuscript tray at 4.30pm on my last day at the library, I riffled through an old desk diary which I had examined earlier and which Hughes had begun to recycle for notes. Amongst what had appeared to be a large block of blank pages in the middle of the book, I found Hughes's own account of the night of his birth.

'I was born within a few minutes of one a.m. – of the clock striking one in the

morning'22, Hughes wrote. And he described how on 17th August 1930, 'a Sunday', his father had gone on his bike to fetch the midwife. As he returned across the river just below their house, the 'Wesleyan clock' had struck one in the morning and when he got home Hughes was just born. At the time of his birth his mother had been watching a bright star through the window which Hughes identified as the planet 'Jupiter rising in 11 Cancer'. He then recorded the exact position in the sky of 'Mars in 22nd Gemini', the Moon 'above again in 17 Taurus' and that 'she could not see Saturn sitting opposite in the West'.

He also wrote that his mother had told him that when she was carrying him 'she repeatedly had the sensation of meeting someone as she went through doorways'. So strong was this sensation that 'she frequently stopped in her tracks'²³.

So, we know exactly what the sky looked like above Mytholmroyd at the moment of Hughes's birth, and it is clear that the energies of the mythological figures which appeared there were, over a lifetime, channeled into his work. Perhaps, too, his mother's story about feeling an attendant, invisible presence during her pregnancy with him was the source of his interest in twins and ghostly doubles.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Australian Aboriginal man, Ben Flick, tells a campfire story of the traditional importance to his people of The Dark Emu:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LzFYFutiwoA>
2. See my discussion of the importance of images and symbols in Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition. Also available in the Ted Hughes Society Journal, Vol. VI Issue I, 2017.
3. This inscribed copy of Wolfwatching is held at Pembroke College, Cambridge University. My thanks to Pembroke College and to Carol Hughes for permission to reproduce this image.
4. Ted Hughes, 'A Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown', in George Mackay Brown, (ed.) *Four Poets for St. Magnus* (Stromness, Orkney: Breckness Press 1987). This poem describes Prince William's horoscope in detail and takes the form of a Court Masque in which the Prince's astrological 'high godparents' gather round his cradle and each speaks according to their particular mythological and astrological character, offering advice and gifts. *A Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown*
5. Ted Hughes, *Tales of the Early World* (London: Faber 1988). p.26.
6. Ted Hughes, *The Tiger Boy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2016).
7. British Library, Add Ms 88918/29/10, Diary entry for April 16, 1984.

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9. Ann Skea, Ted Hughes's *Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom*
10. 'Awake!' is discussed in detail in Ann Skea, *Adam and the Scared Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama*
11. Ted Hughes's essay 'Your World' in *The Observer Magazine*, 29 November 1992. p.39.
12. Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan 2006). p.173.
13. Marcus Manilius, *Astronomicon*, Book 4, Page 14. This translation by Thomas Creech (1659-1700) is available at:
<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A51767.0001.001/1:10?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>.
14. Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980). p.207.
15. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber 1981). p.256.
16. Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes's Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom*
17. Shekinah, in Cabbala, is the 'quasi-independent', exiled, female aspect of God and 'the sphere of Shekina [is] the dwelling place of the soul'. She is the primordial mother, linked with the moon, and her exile due to human sin is 'sometimes represented as the banishment of the queen or of the king's daughter by her husband or father'. The task of the Cabbalist is to work to expiate that sin, end her exile, and seal this with a sacred marriage which reunites the female and male aspects of God. These quotations are from Gershom Scholem's detailed discussion of Shekinah in *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (New York: Schocken 1996). pp.135–157. Chokmah, otherwise known as 'Wisdom' and 'The All Father', is Sephira 2 on the Cabbalists' Tree of Life where it represents one of the aspects of Divine energy manifest in our world.
18. British Library, Add. Mss 88918/12/9
19. Hughes to Keith Sagar, September/October 1973 (LTH 338); Hughes to William Scammell, 2 October 1993 (LTH 648–9).
20. Rober Graves, *Greek Myths* (London: Cassell 1981) pp. 72–3.
21. Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Armidale: UNE Press 1994). p.200.
22. When constructing a birth-chart, astrologers adjust the time of birth to accord with

Universal Time. 'A few minutes after one a.m.', for Hughes's birth date, therefore becomes approximately 12.05 a.m. which in a letter to Ben Sonnenberg, quoted by Diane Middlebrook in *Her Husband* (N.Y. Viking 2003) p. 51, Hughes called 'solar midnight'. In a letter to Olwyn Hughes, 23 February 1957 (THL 94) he also notes the time and the positions of Jupiter 'on the cusp of the fifth', 'near my Moon' and 'Moon opposite my ascendant'.

23. Add.Mss. 88918/10/17. 1970 Collins Desk Diary. These notes are written upside-down on the pages for December 22-31.

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[New Issue of the Journal of the Ted Hughes Society](#)

[July 29, 2025](#)

The new issue of *Ted Hughes Studies: The Journal of the Ted Hughes Society* (Volume 10, Issue 1) is now available for download.

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[The Correspondence of Ted Hughes and Peter Redgrove](#) Neil Roberts

[Ted Hughes and Keith Douglas: Brotherhood, Absence and Elegy](#) Catherine

Macnaughton

Conference Postponed
July 24, 2025

For logistical reasons, the international conference on the legacy of Ted Hughes has been postponed. The conference will now take place at Pembroke College, Cambridge from 15th-18th September 2026. A renewed call for papers will be issued via this website and in the Society's newsletter "Recklings" in autumn 2025.

Recklings - Issue 1
July 19, 2024

We're delighted to announce the publication of Recklings, a quarterly bulletin for Ted Hughes Society members. The first issue was published at the Summer Solstice, featuring a mixture of thoughts, news, reviews and recommendations from a diverse and interesting community of Hughes enthusiasts.

If you're a member, you'll have received a link to access the bulletin last month. If you're not yet a member, click here for details of how you can become one.

New Issue of the Ted Hughes Society Journal
March 26, 2024

The new issue of the Ted Hughes Society Journal has just been published and is available as an open access download here - Volume 9, issue 2 (2024) ISSN 2051-7270 (Download)

Contents include:

Little Cub Hierophant: Shamanic Election, Magical Flight and Ted Hughes's Protagonist of Crow Michael Jones

Ted Hughes – 'No Falsifying Dream' Mike Sweeting

Ted Hughes, the Chthulucene, the Cyborg and the child audience Jessica De Waal

Review Article: The Letters of Seamus Heaney Mark Wormald

Reviews

Ted Hughes: Two Events in Commemoration and Tribute
October 28, 2023

Ted Hughes died on 28th October 1998. Twenty-five years on, two events are being held to mark this anniversary. The first, 'Re-reading Lupercal', coincides with the

publication of a new 'heritage edition' of Hughes's great second collection and takes place at the British Library on 7 November. The event promises an evening of conversation chaired by Carol Hughes in which the poets Alice Oswald and Zaffar Kunial and the novelist Jane Feaver will discuss what remains one of Hughes's most popular and influential books.

Further details of the event can be found on the British Library website. The event is in-person, and tickets can be booked through the British Library.

A week later, on the evening of 14 November, the Ted Hughes Society and the Elmet Trust will be hosting a joint online shared reading from and discussion of the poet's work. The event is for members of the Society and the Trust only. To join the Society [click here](#); to learn more about the Elmet Trust visit their website. Details of the evening will be circulated in due course to Society and Trust members.

'Re-reading Luperca' - British Library Event
September 29, 2023

The British Library has announced an event which will be of interest to all readers of Ted Hughes. To mark the publication of the new 'heritage edition' of Hughes's second collection *Luperca*, on the 7th November 2024 the Library is hosting 'Re-reading Luperca', an evening of conversation chaired by Carol Hughes in which the poets Alice Oswald and Zaffar Kunial and the novelist Jane Feaver will discuss what remains one of Hughes's most popular and influential books.

Further details of the event can be found on the British Library website. The event is in-person, and tickets can be booked through the British Library.

Call for Papers - Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity
March 2, 2023

The Ted Hughes Network have issued a call for papers for a symposium, jointly organised with the British Library, entitled Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity, to be held at the British Library on Friday 15th September 2023.

As the Call for Papers explains:

This symposium is designed to explore and investigate the claim that Hughes's most characteristic, distinctive, and innovative work—wherein lies the weight of his claim to be regarded as a major poet and an internationally significant artist—is essentially Expressionist, characterised by a rejection of objectivity in representation in favour of a Visionary Subjectivity that draws on inner life and imagination to transform and distort content, deploying abstraction, typologies and symbols to shape presentations in an essentially didactic manner.

Full details on the Symposium can be found [here](#) on the Call for Papers, and the deadline for submission is Friday 12th May 2023.

New Issue of the Ted Hughes Society Journal

August 30, 2022

The Ted Hughes Society is delighted to announce the publication of a new issue of the Ted Hughes Society Journal.

This issue of the Journal, whilst much-delayed, arrives just in time for the 9th International Ted Hughes Conference (7th-9th September 2022, University of Huddersfield) and features a range of new essays including: Ann Skea discussing 'The Sorrows of the Deer', Catherine Macnaughton on Hughes's engagement with Phèdre, Maria Kaminska's exploration of irony in Zbigniew Herbert and Crow, and Mark Wormald on the place of John Montague in the web of friendships connecting Barrie Cooke, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes.

Alongside these substantial essays you'll find reviews of works including Heather Clark's *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath*.

The journal is open access and can be found [here](#).

The Ted Hughes Society Podcast - Episode 1: 'The Catch' (part 1)

July 20, 2022

The Ted Hughes Society is delighted to announce the launch of our new monthly podcast: The Ted Hughes Society Podcast.

Hosted by the Society's Secretary, Mick Gowar, the first three podcast episodes will feature recordings from the recent launch reading and discussion of society chair Mark Wormald's excellent new book *The Catch*, and will include contributions from poet, critic and priest Malcolm Guite, author and storyteller Martin Shaw, scholars and writers Terry Gifford and Katherine Robinson, and of course Mark himself. There will also be contributions from writers, critics and storytellers who were not present at the launch event, but nevertheless have interesting insights to contribute to the project of 'fishing for Ted Hughes'.

Future episodes will include discussions with leading Hughes scholars, interviews and other material.

The podcast can be accessed through all the major podcast platforms, such as Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Acast.

The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes - Event Recording Now Available

June 17, 2022

In April 2022, the Society hosted the first public reading and discussion of *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes*, the critically-acclaimed book by Mark Wormald.

Whilst this event was only available to members of the Ted Hughes Society at the time, we have now made the recording available through our Youtube channel:

For more information on the event and the participants, please visit the dedicated Event page.

Mark Hinchcliffe Collection Acquired by University of Huddersfield June 7, 2022

In an exciting development which holds very significant potential for future study of the work of Ted Hughes, the University of Huddersfield recently announced that it has acquired the substantial Hughes collection of the late poet, scholar and member of the Ted Hughes Society, Mark Hinchcliffe.

Ceramic jaguar sculpture made by Ted Hughes, included in the Mark Hinchcliffe Collection at the University of Huddersfield

The collection will be freely available to the public for research at the University's Heritage Quay Archive, and includes some truly outstanding items. As Steve Ely, director of the Ted Hughes Network at the University of Huddersfield explained:

We're delighted to have acquired Mark Hinchcliffe's outstanding collection. It comprises over one hundred and seventy items, including signed first editions of dozens of Hughes's trade, limited-edition and fine-press publications; original letters written by Hughes and his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath; signed and annotated books from Hughes's personal collection; and, some absolutely unique items: a very fine ceramic jaguar sculpted by Hughes in 1967, the only intact example anywhere in the world of Hughes's work in the plastic arts; an album containing hundreds of photographs, including some previously unknown photographs of both Hughes and Plath; a holograph manuscript of the radio play 'Orpheus & Eurydice' with some significant differences to the broadcast and published versions, and, a bespoke edition of the Gehenna Press's limited edition *Howls & Whispers*, comprising the original fine-book, 8 original watercolours by Leonard Baskin and a unique copper-plate, engraved portrait of Sylvia Plath

A long-time member and former chair of the Elmet Trust, Mark Hinchcliffe is much-missed in the community of Ted Hughes scholarship, and it is a fitting tribute to his years of devoted study that his collection will now afford future generations of scholars a unique and exciting entry into such crucial aspects of Hughes's life and work.

The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes - Now Published April 28, 2022

Today (28th April 2022) marks the publication of *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* (Bloomsbury) the long-awaited book by Mark Wormald, the Chair of the Ted Hughes

Society and Fellow of Pembroke College, Cambridge.

The book had its first public reading and discussion at a Ted Hughes Society online event earlier this week, and a recording of this event will be made available soon.

Mark has also read from and spoken about the book under the auspices of Orvis (the leading fly-fishing brand) and you can see this event here:

The book has already started to receive laudatory reviews, with Alex Diggins in *The Critic* observing that the book

is most convincing as an account of care, love even: for fish, but most significantly for the rivers they swim through. You can't shake the feeling that the most central relationship Hughes had was with his two beloved home rivers, the Taw and the Torridge, in Devon. Knowing how quickly rivers sicken, he became vocally involved in their protection [...] Wormald, like Hughes, is intensely alert to fishing as a calendar of time's helter-skelter rush.

And Cal Flyn writing in *The Times* that

In *The Catch*, Wormald offers a partial biography of the former poet laureate [...] by filleting Hughes's literary output – specifically, the long and complicated genesis of his 1983 collection *River* and the poet's private fishing journals. The result is a fine book, penetrating and poetic, filled with honeyed prose and thoughtful criticism.

Those interested in experiencing what is a deeply moving, personal book as well as a brilliant exposition of a whole aspect of Hughes's life and work that has been hitherto little appreciated or understood, can find more details of *The Catch* here, and pick it up in any good bookshop in the UK as of today.

Online Event - *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes*, 25th April 2022
March 25, 2022

The Ted Hughes Society is delighted to announce that our next online event for members will be a reading and discussion of *The Catch: Fishing for Ted Hughes* by Mark Wormald, the Chair of the Ted Hughes Society. The event takes place at 18.30 on Monday 25th April 2022, ahead of the book's publication by Bloomsbury on 28th April 2022.

The event will be introduced and moderated by Katharine Robinson, and will include contributions and responses from Aoine Landweer-Cooke, Malcolm Guite, Martin Shaw and Terry Gifford. It will be open to subscribing members of the Ted Hughes Society only.

The Catch tells the story of Ted Hughes's journey, as a fisherman, poet and father, into and beyond the collection River (1983), and chronicles Mark's own journeys, fishing in Ted's footsteps, his fishing diaries in mind, into the poems of River and other deep waters.

The reading and discussion is likely to concentrate on a few of these poems, so an advance reading of them may be useful: 'Strangers', 'Go Fishing', 'The Kingfisher', 'A Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan' and 'That Morning.'

The event is free of charge for Society members, and to register to attend please visit the Eventbrite page.

Opening of the Barrie Cooke Archive, Pembroke College, Cambridge
February 28, 2022

Last week Pembroke College, Cambridge made the exciting announcement that the Barrie Cooke Archive - a collection of papers and artwork related to the artist Barrie Cooke and his close friends Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, is now open to researchers.

Barrie Cooke in 2012. Photo by Mark Wormald.

Mark Wormald, Fellow of Pembroke College and Chair of the Ted Hughes Society wrote:

Pembroke College is delighted to announce the opening today of the internationally significant literary archive of the British-born expressionist artist Barrie Cooke (1931-2014), fisherman and friend of poets, and an associated collection of 150 images he made in response to their work. Cooke moved to Ireland in 1954, and the archive represents an extraordinary record of creative collaboration across geographical borders as well as between visual and literary art.

The full catalogue of the Barrie Cooke Archive can now be accessed online.

For more information on the discovery of the archive and its acquisition see this article in the Guardian.

The Barrie Cooke Archive will undoubtedly have a great effect on the study of the work of Ted Hughes, and one which will no doubt unfold over several years. The Society will be excited to see what researchers find in this treasure trove.

Dame Marina Warner to give Keynote Lecture at International Ted Hughes Conference
- Extended Call for Papers

January 14, 2022

The Ted Hughes Society are delighted to announce that our patron, Dame Marina

Warner will be giving the keynote lecture at the forthcoming 'Conversation with the World', 9th International Ted Hughes Conference at the University of Huddersfield, 7th-9th September 2022.

Marina Warner, eminent novelist, mythographer and memoirist, wrote the foreword to the recent anniversary edition of Hughes's *Crow*, and spoke at the Society's Ted Hughes's *Crow* at 50 event in 2021.

For those still considering submitting a proposal to speak at 'Conversation with the World', we are also happy to announce an extension to the deadline of the conference's call for papers. The new deadline for submission is 31st January 2022. For more details and the full call for papers, please visit the conference website.

'Mayday on Holderness': A Collaborative Close Reading led by Steve Ely
December 23, 2021

On Thursday January 27th 2022, renowned poet and Ted Hughes scholar Steve Ely will lead an online, collaborative close reading of Hughes's poem 'Mayday on Holderness'.

Steve describes the event:

In a letter to Keith Sagar (16th May, 1974), Hughes's sister Olwyn passed on his description of 'Mayday on Holderness' as:

the introductory poem to what was to be a series, and which included the better poems in LUPERCAL. The whole thing was to be a celebration of the serpentine spirit of the hungry erg [sic]. That serpentine course threads them all together (PC 33).

However we read 'erg' – urge? – the 'serpentine course' is, of course, the digestive system: in a letter to Leonard Baskin in July 1959, Hughes describes 'the general drift of the [Lupercal] poems' as "Man as an elaborately perfected intestine, or upright weasel" (LTH 147). At around the same time Hughes wrote to Olwyn explaining that Lupercal expresses 'an entire vision of life' arranged around 'the notion of God as the devourer – as the mouth & gut', and asserts that 'mother-love' (associated with the sexual urge through the fertility rite of the Roman Lupercalia) is the only 'defence' against the 'natural appetite of everything living to devour everything else' (LTH 148).

The dominant theme of Lupercal is thus the struggle of vitality against death – or, as Leonard Scijag puts it, between 'eros and thanatos', the two principles existing in an explosive, symbiotic, endlessly creative balance.[i] 'Mayday on Holderness' is a

manifesto-like expression of this essentially Heraclitean or Epicurean (Lucretian) worldview – a worldview that would inform Hughes's work throughout his career. It is this that makes 'Mayday on Holderness' such an important poem in his oeuvre; indeed, there is a sense in which the poem provides an 'embryonic template' of his later work in the same way that T.S. Eliot's early poem 'The Death of Saint Narcissus' (according to Hughes in 'A Dancer to God') did to Eliot's later work.[ii]

Steve will open the session with an introductory talk of around fifteen minutes before leading a line-by-line collaborative close reading of the poem in which all present are invited to contribute. Society members who wish to take part should register via Eventbrite by 20 January, when an annotated copy of the poem and a handout will be distributed.

[i] Leonard M. Scijag, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986). p.75.

[ii] Gillian Groszewski, 'A Dancer to God', <http://thetedsHughessociety.org/dancertogod>

'Conversation with the World': the 9th International Ted Hughes Conference - A Call for Papers

November 5, 2021

The Ted Hughes Network have issued a call for papers for the 9th International Ted Hughes Conference, entitled 'Conversation with the World' and hosted at the University of Huddersfield, 7-9th September 2022.

Engaging the 15th anniversary of the publication of Christopher Reid's landmark *Letters of Ted Hughes* volume, the conference calls for papers considering the full range of Hughes's poetic and epistolary 'conversation with the world'. The deadline for submission of proposed papers and panels is 17th January 2021.

More details of the conference, including the full CFP can be found on the event's website.

Cave Birds - an online discussion with Neil Roberts and Kate Robinson

October 15, 2021

Untitled.png

Cave Birds is the least well known and understood of Hughes's major collections. This is partly because some of the poems are difficult, but the difficulty is increased by the fact that it has never been republished with the Leonard Baskin drawings that are an integral part of the work. Words and images are more closely connected than in any other book by Hughes. It doesn't help that Hughes himself seems not to have liked

Cave Birds.

Neil Roberts and Kate Robinson disagree with Hughes and will be leading a discussion which they hope will enhance understanding and appreciation of this neglected masterpiece. Neil will be exploring the way the sequence developed in response to Baskin's drawings. Kate will discuss the collection's debts to early Welsh literature. These Welsh underpinnings provide a window into the book's narrative and into Hughes's evolving syncretism in this 'Alchemical Cave Drama'.

The event takes place online: Wednesday 3 November, 18.00-19.30 GMT, to register please follow the link below.

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/cave-birds-a-discussion-with-neil-roberts-and-katherine-robinson-tickets-183749278037?utm-campaign=social&utm-content=attendeeshare&utm-medium=discovery&utm-term=listing&utm-source=cp&aff=escb>

Online Book Launch - Carrie Smith and James Underwood October 12, 2021

Ted Hughes Society members Carrie Smith and James Underwood will be holding an online launch of their new books on Monday, October 25th from 6:00pm-7:00pm.

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315HoUZhevS._SX331_BO1,204,203,200_.jpg

Carrie's *The Page Is Printed* is a study of Ted Hughes's composition methods, which includes a consideration of the physical circumstances - the places, paper, ink, number and variety of drafts - and also the 'intellectual and creative environments' in which the poems were made.

James has recently published *Early Larkin*, a study of the early career of a poet who Ted Hughes held in a warm personal regard, which was not always reciprocated. Of particular interest is James's investigation of the schoolgirl stories of Brunette Coleman, a pseudonym of Larkin's, and how writing these books encouraged Larkin's 'interest in everything outside himself' and ultimately helped the poet discover his distinctive voice.

If you'd like to attend, please click on this link:

<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/hughes-and-larkin-book-launches-registration-181946796767>

Ted Hughes and the Theatre: A British Library Event August 23, 2021

15-sep-Ted Hughes.jpeg

The British Library have announced an online event which will be of interest to all Society members and readers of Hughes: *Ted Hughes and the Theatre* takes place at

19.30 on Wednesday 15th September 2021.

The event brings together Ted Hughes Society Patron Melvyn Bragg, and the award-winning theatre and opera directors Tim Supple, Jonathan Kent and David Thacker for a discussion of Hughes's work in the theatre and, most fascinatingly, a conversation around Kent, Supple, and Thacker's collaborations with Hughes.

The event costs £5.00 and more information and registration can be found on the BL's event page.

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Ted Hughes and the Occult Tradition

© Ann Skea 2017.

Published in the Ted Hughes Society Journal. Vol.6, Issue 1, 2017.

The use of poetry as a means of contacting and channeling hidden energies has a long history and in many cultures poets were, and sometimes still are, regarded as having special access to divine and magical energies.

When introducing some of his work in a recording made in 1978, Ted Hughes spoke of poetry as 'a way of making things happen the way you want them to happen.'¹ And he wrote in 'Strong Feelings' of the way in which poetry appears in anthropological literature as 'power—charms, tools and practical agents in the business of gaining desired ends (WP 34).'

In that same 1978 recording, he went on to describe his own experience of 'writing and rewriting' the poem 'Earth Numb' (CP 541) 'over two or three years' until one day he seemed 'to have got it just right'. The next day he caught a large salmon, then two days later, another two, 'even larger'. It seemed to him, he said, that although he never thought of the poem as a 'hunting incantation', somehow 'everything had to happen as in the poem'.

Yet this sort of 'hunting magic' was not the only way in which old poetic traditions influenced Hughes' work. Long before he began his anthropological studies at Cambridge University, his interest in the work of W.B Yeats had introduced him to the magically inspired beliefs which Yeats expressed in works like *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, *The Vision* and 'The Symbolism of Poetry'. As Hughes told Ekbert Faas in 1970, 'Yeats spellbound me for about six years. I got to him not so much through his verse as through his other interests, folklore, and magic in particular.'² Especially in those years when he was working in Cambridge University Library after his graduation, Hughes read many of the older mystical and occult texts which Yeats himself had studied³, and books written by other members of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn of which Yeats was an initiated member⁴. These included books on Hermetic Christian cabbala, alchemy, astrology, divination, tarot and geomancy, as well as Rosicrucian and Theosophical writings. And records held by the library demonstrate his serious interest in historically important texts which deal with astronomy and astrology⁵.

The Cambridge University Library is almost certainly where Hughes read some of the earliest English occult treatises written as poems by alchemists like George Ripley (1415-1490), Thomas Norton (c.1433-c.1513), and (in the seventeenth century) by Eugenius Philalethes (the name adopted by Thomas Vaughan (1621-66)) and his twin brother Henry⁶. Many anonymous alchemical works were also written as poems - a medium which perfectly suits the symbolic, metaphorical and imaginative language in which the spiritual and technical secrets of alchemy have been couched since its earliest appearance, reputedly in Ancient Egypt⁷.

CaveBirds

These clearly influenced Hughes' own alchemical poem *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama*, which has the same multi-layered character as these ancient alchemical poems. Beneath the surface story lies the drama of spiritual renewal; the structure of the sequence imitates the technical chemical process for making gold; and reflected in its metaphors and symbols is a description of the various stages of that purifying process⁸.

The fundamental principles of alchemy, however, are far broader and far older than this brief description suggests and they have been reflected in the work of poets since at least the time of Petrarch (1304-74), Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) and Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400). All of whom, in turn, reflected the belief in the occult powers of poetry which was common to the ancient Greek, Egyptian and Arabs worlds.

Hughes knew Chaucer's work exceptionally well. Whilst at university, he wrote to his sister that he would get up at 6a.m. to read a Shakespeare play and 'sometimes half-an-hour of Chaucer as well'⁹; he numbered Chaucer amongst those poets he once regarded as his 'sacred canon'¹⁰; and he twice claims Chaucer as 'Our Chaucer' in 'St Botolph's' (CP 1051-2), where he also refers to Dante. Both Chaucer and Dante were familiar with the work of Petrarch, whose work was widely known in Italy where Renaissance humanists were actively seeking out ancient knowledge.

petrarch

Petrarch collected and translated Greek, Roman, Hebrew and Arabic classics, including the works by Livy, Cicero, Virgil, Ovid and Homer. Through his translations of Cicero, Petrarch came to know of the work of a Roman disciple of Epicurus, Titus Lucretius Carus (c.99-55 BCE), and Lucretius' philosophical poem *De rerum natura* (On the Nature of Things) was brought to Florence in 1471. There, together with other ancient texts translated at that time, it strongly influenced humanist thinking and, for centuries after, it was adopted, adapted and challenged by poets, philosophers and scientists, including, amongst poets, Ovid, Virgil, Sidney, Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth, as well as such figures as Thomas More, Erasmus, Spinoza and John Dee; the Cambridge Platonists; and the founders and earliest members of The Royal Society.

LUCRETIUS

In his poem, Lucretius described not only the void, the character, motion and

combination of atoms, and the infinity of the universe, but also the nature and composition of the mind and the soul, the existence and character of images and mental pictures, and the passion of love. Poets, in particular, understood his method of 'sweetening our pauper speech' with song and expounding dry 'doctrine' in ways which 'touch it with sweet honey of the Muse.'¹¹

He taught that all things are interwoven – that all parts influence one another; and that everything in this corporeal world decays and ends, becoming again primal germs from which, through Nature, all new things are formed. Especially, he claimed that 'Only Nature's aspect and her law' can teach us. Thus, we should look with wonder on Nature.

In his Proem to Book 1, Lucretius hymns the powers of the Goddess Venus, who as the goddess of Nature 'Guidest the Cosmos', and he calls on her to be 'co-partner' in this verse wherein he intends

'...with steady mind to cast
The purport of the skies – the Law behind
The wandering courses of the sun and moon;
To scan the powers that speed all life below;
But most to see with reasonable eyes
Of what the mind, of what the soul is made'.

Above all, Lucretius taught that human beings embody the divine energies and that we, not God or the gods or any other external authority, are responsible for our own lives. 'The energy of the soul', he wrote, 'is sewn about / In all the body' and is the agent of the will: for 'the soul is conjoined with the mind', and 'no-one starts to do a thing, before / The intellect provisions what it wills'. We can, however, as Lucretius did, call on Venus's Power of Love to aid us in our lives.

Lucretius' reverence for Venus, Goddess of Love, and his insistence on the importance and the wonder of Nature strongly influenced Renaissance poetry and art¹². And amongst the many later poets whose work was directly influenced by Lucretius's poem were Spenser, Milton, Dryden and Tennyson, all of whom Hughes had read closely. There are copies of the works of all these poets in Hughes' library and, in an interview with Drue Heinz in 1995, Hughes said of his early interest in poetry: 'I used to sit in the woods muttering through my books. I read the whole of *The Faerie Queen* like that. All of Milton. Lots more. It became a sort of hobby-habit'¹³.

Milton read moral philosophy whilst at Cambridge University and translated *De rerum natura*. He reflected some of its teachings about body and soul in *Paradise Lost*. Dryden translated parts of it. And Tennyson's poem 'Lucretius' satirises many of Lucretius' beliefs and wishes on him a wife named Lucilla who, 'when the morning flush / Of passion and the first embrace had died / Between them', grew tired of her husband neglecting her for his work, administered a charm which gave him dreams in which all his philosophical ideas were turned against him, and, thus, 'destroyed him'. Yeats had certainly read Dryden's translations, since he is recorded as saying that Lucretius wrote

‘the finest description of sexual intercourse ever written.’¹⁴

Although Hughes may not have read the whole poem, he had read Dryden’s translations¹⁵. His Crow poem, ‘Lovesong’ in which the lovers grip, press, bite, mutilate and devour each other until ‘In the morning’ they ‘wore each others’ face’, (CP 256), reflects Lucretius’ description, in Book IV, ‘The Passion of Love’, of those ‘sick-at-soul with love-pining’ who ‘cannot fix / On what to first enjoy with eyes and hands’, but

‘squeeze so tight,
And pain the creature’s body, close their teeth
Often against her lips, and smite with kiss
Mouth into mouth,’
then

‘greedily their frames they lock
powerless
To rub off aught, or penetrate or pass
With body entire into body – for oft
They seem to struggle thus to do.’

Hughes’ own well-attested reverence for the Goddess clearly began early with his poem ‘Song’ (CP 24). River And Moortown, Under the North Star, River and many individual poems reflect the wonders of Nature and demonstrate her powers over life, death and regeneration.

Perhaps it is significant, too, that the poem written by Lorenzo de’ Medici (Lorenzo The Magnificent) (1449-1492) which Hughes chose to translated in 1992/3, is a sonnet which clearly states Lucretius’ teachings about the impermanence of all life. It begins: ‘How futile every hope is, that we have’, ‘We learn from our master – the Grave’. And it goes on to state that whatever sort of life we choose to lead: ‘Nothing is still. And nothing lasts. Only death.’¹⁶

Lucretius’ poem was just one of the influential texts which were collected, translated, circulated and discussed during the Italian Renaissance and which influenced all the magical and creative arts of that time, especially at the Florentine courts of Cosimo de’ Medici (1389-1464) and his grandson, Lorenzo¹⁷. Hebraic, Spanish, Arabic and Egyptian works were also widely circulated; and one, in particular, through the writing of Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) and, later, his younger contemporary and protégé Picco della Mirandola (1463-94) came to be of particular importance.

In 1463, Ficino, who was a priest, physician and scholar, was instructed by his patron, Cosimo d’ Medici, to abandon his translation of Plato’s works into Latin and begin work immediately on an almost complete Greek manuscript which containing a copy of the Corpus Hermeticum. Ficino called his translation the Pymander¹⁸ and this book became fundamental to all later studies of Hermeticism, alchemy and magic.

Hermes, like Lucretius, taught that all things are interwoven. The first of twelve

statements on the Emerald Tablet attributed to Hermes is

'In truth, certainly and without doubt, whatever is below is like that which is above. And whatever is above is like that which is below, to accomplish the miracles of the one thing.'¹⁹

Hermes

Hermeticists believe that this reciprocal dependence between the Macrocosm of the Universe and the Microcosm of our World allows divine powers to be transmitted to humans via the celestial bodies so that the Divine Spark within us may reunite us with the Creator. Astrology, talismans, magic and other sympathetic magic may be used to draw down these powers, but only a carefully prepared human body is able to receive them. As in Lucretius's teachings, the development of human imagination and willpower is of prime importance: and the Corpus Hermeticum teaches the way in which these may be developed. Like the agency of the Goddess Venus in *De rerum natura*, the greatest power of Hermeticism is Love – the essence which 'conquers everything subtle and penetrates everything solid' and which is born of the sun and the moon, nursed by the earth, and moves between heaven and earth bringing 'glory to the world' and removing darkness from the human spirit²⁰.

Most importantly, the transmission of divine powers is achieved through images created by the imagination from the memory of the Platonic Perfect Forms. The creative arts – poetry, music and art – are instrumental in this. And, although Lucretius wrote of the 'Supreme Gods' as careless of mankind, his description of the way in which we receive images was easily adapted by Renaissance Hermeticists to explain how such divine powers could be channelled to earth. Just as 'tenuous images from things are sent, / From off the utmost outside of things' and travel through the 'ether' to 'batter' our senses, so the images 'of heavenly bodies' are 'carried into the intellect of man / As the announcers of their divine form.'²¹ Just so, for centuries, have the images of gods and religious icons, through our imagination and faith, connected us with the divine.

For Hermetic Neoplatonists, images became all important. For them, as Gombrich put it in his examination of Renaissance art, 'the numbers and proportions of a thing preserved in the image' impart to that image 'something of the spiritual essence which it embodies.'²²

Blake, in a later century, wrote of 'Poetry, Painting & Music' as 'the three powers in Man of conversing with Paradise'²³; and he ascribed to the Lucretian/Hermetic teaching that 'All deities reside in the human breast' and that 'every thing that lives is Holy.' Hughes, too, has his God in *What is the Truth* tell his son that 'the Truth is that' he is all the animals: 'I am each of these things....And each of these things is Me.'^(WIT 121) And for both Blake and Hughes, Ficino's teachings about the essential power of the imagination and poetry to link us to the source of creative energies, and the Lucretian and Renaissance Humanist and Neoplatonic emphasis on our ability to control our own lives, remained of utmost importance.

Ficino sang Orphic hymns for their connection with Pythagorean Music of the Spheres

and as ritual harmonies which, he believed, could draw down the powers of the gods through the spiritus mundi, 'which is infused throughout the universe' and is 'the vehicle of stellar influences.'²⁴ And W.B. Yeats' reference to the emergence of 'a vast image out of the Spiritus Mundi' in his poem 'The Second Coming', suggests his familiarity with Ficino's work.

When Hughes told Drue Heinz that poetry and music have 'medicinal'²⁵ healing power, he too was echoing Ficino, who wrote of Plato's claim that true music and poetry most effectively imitate celestial music; that 'poetry expresses with fire the most profound' and 'prophetic' meanings; that this fire – this 'poetic frenzy' – springs from a rapture inspired by the Muses; and that by the 'burning desire' for 'divine beauty' the human spirit 'may be drawn to the heavens'. Ficino went on to define 'four kinds of divine frenzy: love, poetry, the mysteries and prophecy.' Love, inspired by the Goddess, was the most important.

Frances Yates (of whose books Hughes attempted to acquire 'a definitive collection'²⁶) examined closely the many ways in which Ficino interpreted the Corpus Hermeticum, and the shaping influence of his writings on Renaissance Hermetic Neoplatonism. She also wrote in detail of the way Pico della Mirandola, who had studied Hebrew and Arabic at university in Padua and had read widely in Hebrew Cabbalistic manuscripts, saw the connection between Hermeticism and Cabbala. If Ficino's work made Hermes Trismegistus 'the most important figure in the Renaissance revival of magic', as Yates claims²⁷, it is said that Pico 'was the first Christian to treat knowledge of Kabbalah as valuable.'²⁸ Both tried to present dangerously heretical teachings in ways which accorded with Christianity.

Pico

Hughes' owned a copy of Ficino's Book of Life, which deals, amongst many other things, with Nature as a 'magician'; 'the power of images and medicine'; 'The figures of the heavens and the use of images'; the powers that draw 'the favours of the heavenly bodies, that is the soul of the world, of the stars and of daemons'; and 'the power of words and songs in obtaining heavenly gifts.'²⁹ Hughes' interest in astrology, however, began long before he owned this particular book and he would have learned much about Ficino's and Pico's Hermeticism, Neoplatonism and Cabbala from the writings of W.B. Yeats; from Yeats' fellow members of the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn³⁰; and from many other sources. He would certainly have read Yeats' *Per Amicia Silentia Luna*, which describes the Spiritus Mundi and also seems to refer to Ficino's teaching about divine furor when Yeats writes that 'for the awakening, for vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition offers us a different word – ecstasy'.³¹ In *The Symbolism of Poetry*, too, Yeats writes that 'all sounds, all colours, all forms,... evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions' which 'call down among us certain disembodied powers'; and 'a work of art, whether it be epic or song... the more powerful it is...the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us'.³² In another link with Ficino's divine furor, he writes that: 'the soul moves among symbols and infolds in symbols when trance, or madness or deep meditation has withdrawn it from every impulse but its own'.³³

Finally, Hughes would also have known Sir Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesie*, in which Sidney writes that poets may be inspired by the gods so that 'whatsoever they write proceeds of a divine fury' and that 'the sacred mysteries of poesie' contain occult secrets which are 'written darkly, lest by profane wits it should be abused'³⁴.

When Hughes expressed his own belief in the summoning power of symbols in his 1970 interview with Faas, he spoke of them as 'invocations of elemental force, demonic force' with the power to 'destroy an impure nature and serve a pure one.'³⁵ It is interesting, too, that he then went on to refer to his use of the Red Cross Knight as a controlling image in his poem, 'Gog'. He also used this image in an unpublished fragment of his 'lost' play 'The Calm'³⁶, which suggests his understanding of the similar symbolic use of this figure in Spenser's allegorical poem *The Faerie Queene*, where Spenser titles the 'Firste book': 'The legend of the Knight of the Red Crosse, or of Holiness.'³⁷

Spenser's poem is essentially a hymn to the Goddess, and his use of numbers to structure his poetry, as in works by Chaucer and Milton, was an expression of the influence of new European learning acquired from Ancient Greek texts, in this case, from the mathematical and occult theories about harmony and number derived from Pythagoras and Plato³⁸. Hughes seems not to have used numerology in that way, telling Drue Heinz that it was not the inflexible ordering of metrics, stanzas and rhyme which interested him but 'a kind of deeper, hidden form' which although it 'doesn't show regular metrical patterning or end rhyme, can't in any way be called "free"' and has a sort 'musical inevitability'. His main argument for not often using regular metre, stanza and rhyme was that, although they could offer 'mathematical satisfaction' and the best examples had 'a kind of primal force', he wanted 'to gain access to the huge variety of musical patterns that they shut out'.³⁹ He did admit to Drue Heinz that the year after his first book was published he 'wrote verses with three magical assonances to the line with the intention of abolishing certain critics.'⁴⁰ And he did use numerology in numbering Rainbow Press and Gehenna Press limited editions, several of which were issued in runs limited to 101 books, a number which represents the completion of a cycle (100) and a new beginning (1) and which, by combining the digits, reduces to 11, a powerful Master number in magic and numerology. He used it, too, in the Cabbalistic numerology of 'Adam and the Sacred Nine', in *Capriccio*, *Howls & Whispers* and, especially, in *Birthday Letters*, where the 88 poems represent a complete journey around the 88 paths of the four overlapping Cabbalistic Trees of Life.⁴¹

Memory, Will, Imagination and Love are the basic principles of the occult tradition, and, together with the symbolism and precise natural rhythms associated with astrology, these skills are necessary in order to channel the divine energies into our world. Hughes trained himself rigorously in all these.

He had a remarkable memory but he also used traditional techniques to train and improve it. In a letter to Sylvia Plath on the 3rd of October 1956 he wrote of his plan to 'get three hours of thinking in a day. Not thinking, perhaps, but remembering', and of trying to look at the actual thing in front of [him], because 'As soon as I begin imagining

the thing happening in my world, everything becomes right' (LTH 51–2). He taught his children memory techniques and in a letter to Frieda and Nicholas in 1971 he instructed them to 'practise making memory lists', and promised them a shilling for each list they could recite 'both forward and backward without mistake' when he met them the following weekend (LTH 312–3). And Giordano Bruno's teachings on Cabbala and on his memory system, both extensively examined by Frances Yates, strongly influenced Hughes. Bruno's memory system was copied from an image system described by Cicero, Simonides and another, anonymous, Latin author, and it was taught in the early Italian universities as part of Rhetoric (one of the 7 liberal arts).⁴² Hughes' 'Introduction' to *By Heart: 101 Poems to Remember* describes essentially the same technique. In 1997, when he gave me a copy of that book he inscribed it 'the skeleton key to the Treasure Houses', and exhorted me to practise the memory techniques.

In his own work, Hughes experimented seriously with many occult arts and techniques of magic. The first work to be published after his alchemical *Cave Birds*, was the *Cabbalistic Adam and the Sacred Nine*. Adam In Crow, possibly influenced by Franz Bardon's book *Initiation into Hermetics*, which he read in the early 1960s and recommended and gave to friends⁴³, he appears to have created an 'elementary' which expressed the Daemonic, shadow side of human nature. Bardon teaches that an elementary may be created mentally, astrally or physically but each method relies on the creation of an image which is then charged with spirit by 'the power of the imagination'. It should be given 'Will, Intelligence, Sentience and Consciousness'; life is then breathed into it and 'any further work then becomes a matter of the imagination.'⁴⁴ *Gaudete*, which was begun in 1964 but did not achieve its published form until 1977, is a shamanic, Bacchic, Dionysian creation which ends with hymns to the Goddess inspired by sacred Southern Indian hymns to Siva⁴⁵.

In 1982, for the birth of HRH Prince William, Hughes wrote *The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown*, an astrological poem based on the Prince's birth chart, in which the chief planetary gods each pronounce their blessing⁴⁶. And the cross-shaped poem he created for the letter S in David Hockney's *Alphabet* was almost certainly crafted for occult purposes⁴⁷.

In all of these, and throughout his work, there is evidence of Hughes' acceptance of the traditional occult beliefs in the summoning power of images and imagination. A poem, as he told young poets in *Poetry in the Making*, is 'an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit' and he advised them to 'imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it... Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic' (PM 18–19). His own early hunting experiences also gave him an empathy with animals and taught him how to immerse himself in their world: skills which allowed him to create the poetic magic which is readily apparent in poems like 'Hawk Roosting' (THCP 68), 'An Otter' (THCP 79–80), 'Go Fishing' (THCP 652) 'That Morning' (THCP 663–4) and many others.

In Hughes' notebooks in the British Library, there are astrological charts; pages of magical sigils and images copied from old Grimoires; and detailed notes on the ten

Sephiroth of the Cabbalistic Tree, listing the magical 'correspondences' of each (for instance, magical image, god name, angelic order, planet, qliphoth, spiritual experience). Hughes' extensive knowledge of the occult tradition was apparent in the 'Note' he wrote for his selection of Shakespeare's verse, and it is even clearer in the pages of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* in which he discussed 'Shakespeare and Occult Neoplatonism' (later published separately in *Winter Pollen*).⁴⁸ There, he describes the salient features of Hermetic Occult Neoplatonism and Cabbala and the influence of 'the great formative figures of Giordano Bruno and John Dee' Deon English poets such as Sir Philip Sidney and other members of the Areopagus⁴⁹; on Henry Wriothesley and 'the group for which 'Love's Labours Lost' was written' (the so-called 'School of the Night')⁵⁰; and, through his close connection with these poets, on Shakespeare. That Shakespeare was familiar with at least some of the work of Pico is apparent in Hamlet's speech 'O what a piece of work is a man' (Hamlet, II, ii, 316), which almost paraphrases Pico's 'Oration on the Dignity of Man', which itself 'echoes throughout with the words of Magia and Cabala.'⁵¹

Bruno

In *De imaginum compositae*, Bruno emphasises the primacy of the imagination in religion and magic; and he identifies the furor roused by true poetry, painting and music as the instrument for communicating with the divine and reaching the Truth⁵². In *De gli Eroici Furori* (which he dedicated to Sir Philip Sidney) he refers to the 'mystical and cabbalistic doctrines' found in the Canticles of Solomon as his model. And he suggests, too, the sort of spiritual summons Hughes discussed with Ekbert Faas, when he writes: 'the ultimate design in this work to which I have been called, was to signify divine contemplation and present the eye and ear with other frenzies, not those caused by vulgar love, but those caused by heroic love.'⁵³

The 'operative Magi of the Renaissance', according to Frances Yates, used music, art and poetry to draw down divine energies into our world.⁵⁴ Everything Hughes had learned about magic, imagination, memory, images and Love from earlier philosophers and poets, and every skill he had learned with and alongside this knowledge, was essential to his creation of *Capriccio*, *Birthday Letters* and *Howls & Whispers*⁵⁵. Unlike Bruno, he did choose a worldly woman to represent the Goddess. Just as Dante chose Beatrice, Sidney chose Stella, and Spenser chose Queen Elizabeth I in his *Fairie Queen*, Hughes chose Sylvia Plath for whom to write his 'Canticle'. For all of these poets it was the music, the rhythms, the rituals, the acts of imagining and remembering, and the sheer magic of poetry which recaptured the ecstasy, the furor, of love and drew divine healing energy into our world. So, *Birthday Letters* became one more hymn to the Goddess of Love in a long, and largely occult (or hidden) poetic tradition.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Ted Hughes, *The Critical Forum Series* (Norwich Tapes Ltd: 1978). A transcript of this tape can be found at [./CriticalForum.htm](#)
2. Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara U.S.A: Black Sparrow

Press, 1980), p. 202.

3. Lucas Myers, *The Essential Self* (London: Richard Hollis, 2011), p. 13.

4. In 1885, at the age of twenty, Yeats became a founding member of the Dublin Hermetic Society, which adopted the principles of Madam Blavatsky's Theosophical Society. He later joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn where he rose to the rank of Imperator before breaking away to found Stella Matutina.

5 ULIB 8/1/8: On 10 February 1954, Hughes consulted the influential Ephemeris by Andrea Argoli (1648) which also discusses the astronomical calculations and hypotheses of Tycho Brahe. On 16 February 1955, he consulted William Lilly's *Christian Astrology* (1647): a work based on the astronomical studies of Ptolemy, Dee, Fludd, Kepler and others.

6. George Ripley, *The Compound of Alchemy* (1471); Thomas Norton, *Ordinal of Alchemy* (1477); Thomas Vaughan, *Anthroposophia Theomagica* (1650); *Anima Magica Abscondita* (1650) and *Lumen de Lumin* (1651); Henry Vaughan, *The Chymist's Key* (1657).

7. The alchemical process of progressively refining base matter until gold is produced is not only a chemical process but also a spiritual art aimed at progressively purifying the human soul until the gold of spiritual wholeness is achieved.

8. All this is examined in detail in Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Armidale, Australia: University of New England Press, 1994).

9. Letter to Olwyn Hughes, February, 1952, in Reid, C. *Letters of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber, 200), p. 12.

10. 'At twenty-one, my sacred canon was fixed: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot'. Interview with Drue Heinz in *The Paris Review* (USA: Spring 1995), 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry No.71. No.134'.

11. All quotations from the Lucretius' *De rerum natura* are from the Gutenberg Ebook, (<https://www.gutenberg.org>).

12. E.H. Gombrich, discusses this influence in detail in *Symbolic Images* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972) where he examines the art of Michelangelo (1475-1564), Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) and, in particular, Botticelli (1445-1510).

13. Heinz interview with Hughes, *The Paris Review*. p.61.

14. Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve* (New York, Norton & Co, 2011), p. 197.

15. A copy of Florio's translation of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* in which sixteen verses of Lucretius' poem are quoted is held in Hughes' library at Emory University, Atlanta, USA.
16. Daniel Weissbort, *Ted Hughes: Selected Translations* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 100.
17. The number of ancient Greek philosophers, mathematicians, astronomers and geometricians whose work was widely known is apparent in the so-called 'The School of Athens' fresco painted by Raphael for the Papal Palace of the Vatican between 1509–1511. These include Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Euclid, Plotinus, Heraclitus and Epicurus. Raphael's fresco has the accompanying inscription, 'Seek Knowledge of Causes'. The suggested identification of the 19 figures in this fresco can be found at: Wikipedia 'School of Athens'.
18. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 11-12.
19. Titus Burckhardt, *Alchemy* (Dorset: Element Books, 1968), p. 196. The Arabic text attributed to Gerber was translated into Latin in the Middle Ages and, as the *Tabula Smaragdina*, was widely distributed amongst alchemists. Isaac Newton's translation is held in Kings College Library, Cambridge.
20. Titus Burckhardt, pp. 196-7.
21. Lucretius, Book IV. 'Existence and Character of Images'.
22. Gombrich, pp. 89-90.
23. William Blake: *Poems and Prophecies* (London: Dent, 1970), 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell', pp. 47; 55.
24. Frances Yates, pp. 68-9; 77-8.
25. Heinz interview with Hughes, *The Paris Review*, p. 82
26. In 1983, Roy Davids gave Hughes a copy of *Renaissance and Reform: the Italian Contribution* by Frances Yates and inscribed it 'Ted, towards your definitive collection of Frances Yates...'
27. Yates, p. 18.
28. Stamford University, *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Plato, 'Giovanni Pico della Mirandola'.
29. Marsilio Ficino, *The Book of Life*, Boer, C (trans.), (Texas: Spring Publications,

University of Dallas, 1980).

30. In particular, A.E.Waite, MacGregor Mathers, Aleister Crowley and Helena Blavatsky, all of whom studied and wrote about Hermetic Neoplatonism, Cabbala and other early occult philosophical teachings, and also practiced magical techniques based on these studies.

31. William Butler Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunas*, section V, p. 30. Gutenberg , (<https://www.gutenberg.org>).

32. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry', II, p. 90. Gutenberg. The Collected Works of W.B.Yeats. Vol.6., (<https://www.gutenberg.org>).

33. Yeats, 'The Symbolism of Poetry', IV, p. 197. Gutenberg. The Collected Works of W.B.Yeats. Vol.6., (<https://www.gutenberg.org>).

34. Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, *Astrophil and Stella* and other writings (London: Dent, 1977), p. 113.

35. Faas, p. 199.

36. In an unpublished mss. fragment held at Smith College, two characters are discovered in a bed with an image of the Red Cross Knight on the coverlet.

37 Edmund Spencer, *The Faerie Queen*, Dedication and Title. Gutenberg., (<https://www.gutenberg.org>)

38. See Alastair Fowler's detailed discussion of this in *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964); and *Time's Purple Masquers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). Also, together with Christopher Butler, in *Time Beguiling Sport: Number Symbolism in Shakespeare's 'Venus and Adonis'* published in Bloom, E. (ed.), *Shakespeare 1564–1964* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1964), pp. 124–33.

39. Drue Heinz, *The Paris Review*, p.91–4

40. Heinz, *The Paris Review*, p. 68.

41. For a detailed discussion of the Cabbalistic nature of these works see Ann Skea's *Adam and the Sacred Nine: A Cabbalistic Drama* ([./AdamHome.html](#)); and *Poetry and Magic*, ([./BLCabala.htm](#)); *Howls & Whispers* ([./HWCabala.htm](#)); and *Capriccio* ([./CapriccioHome.htm](#))

42. Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, Chapter 1: the three Latin sources for the classical art of memory, (London: Pimlico, 1966). pp 17–41

43. Franz Bardon, *Initiation into Hermetics* (Germany: Ruggeberg, 1962). Hughes

recommended this book to Daniel Weissbort, as the latter told me, and in 1968 he sent a copy to Lucas Myers with the inscription 'To Lucas from the Crow' (e-mail Myers to Skea 16 February 2001). He also bought Michael Baldwin a copy of *The Magician*, his training and work, Butler, W.E. (London: Aquarian Press, 1959), cf. Baldwin, Hughes and Shamanism (A Memoir) ([./MichaelBaldwinMemoir1.htm](#)). And he had Butler's book, *Magic and the Qabala* (London: Aquarian Press, 1964), in his library.

44. Bardon, pp. 196-206.

45. This is discussed in detail in Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes' Vacanas', in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford (eds.) *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Also available at 'Ted Hughes' Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom' ([./THVacanas.html](#)).

46. Ted Hughes, 'The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown: What the starry heavens sang for HRH Prince William on 21 July 1982' in George Mackay Brown, (ed.), *Four Poems for St. Magnus* (Orkney: Breckness Press, 1987). For a discussion of this poem, see Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes and The Zodiac in the Shape of a Crown* ([./Zodiacpoem.htm](#)).

47. See Ann Skea, 'Ted Hughes and David Hockney's Alphabet', *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, No.5. 2016.

48. Ted Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (London: Faber, 1971), pp. 167–170; *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber, 1992), pp. 19–34; *Winter Pollen* (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 293–309.

49. Members of the so-called 'Areopagus' were poets who studied classical meter and number with the goal of reforming poetry. They included Philip Sidney, Gabriel Harvey, Edmund Spenser and Edward Dyer.

50 This group included Sir Walter Raleigh, Christopher Marlowe, George Chapman and Thomas Harriot.

51. Yates, pp. 102–3. This begins 'What a great miracle is Man, O Asclepius'.

52. Yates, pp. 335–6.

53. *De Gli Eroici Furori* contains love poems and dialogues which use Petrarchan conceits, accompanied by commentaries about their mystical meaning. An English translation by Paolo Eugene Memmo, Jr. (1994) can be found at Giordano Bruno (<http://esotericarchives.com/bruno/furori.htm>). All quotations are from this translation.

54. Yates, pp. 104–5

55. This is examined in detail in Ann Skea's *Poetry and Magic*, ([./BLCabala.htm](#)); *Howls & Whispers* ([./HWCabala.htm](#)); and *Capriccio* ([./CapriccioHome.htm](#))

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and David Hockney's Alphabet

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Published in the Ted Hughes Society Journal. Vol.5, Issue 1, 2016.

In 1991, to raise money for the AIDS Crisis Trust, David Hockney created 26 pictures of individual letters of the alphabet. Stephen Spender, on behalf of that charity then sent one letter to each of twenty-six well-known British and American writers inviting them to contribute original text in response to their particular letter.

The results were edited by Spender and compiled into a book which was first published by Faber and Faber in a limited edition of 300 copies, each signed by Hockney, Spender and each of the contributors¹.

Amongst those contacted by Spender were Paul Theroux, Seamus Heaney, Susan Sontag, Julian Barnes, Erica Jong, Douglas Adams, Iris Murdoch and Ted Hughes. Valerie Eliot provided a letter from T.S. Eliot to a young aspiring writer; and Lord Northwich found a 19th-century alphabet poem by C.C. Banborough. Both of these were included in the book.

Norman Mailer, who was given the letter 'F', declined to make a contribution on the grounds that he was working on a novel which, he said, "Insists on being a wife", "a most possessive matrimonial partner" who will not "let him out of her sight for even two days to have some fun with the letter F". "You poets", he wrote, "don't know how lucky you are with your one-night stands".

Spender thought this letter "such a good model of polite rejection" that he included it as Mailer's contribution.

Ted Hughes was given the letter 'S' which, as Spender wrote in his Introduction to the book, sent him "on a winding journey, beginning with eel and traversing a lifetime of surreal associations until it returns, eel-like, to wireworm".

So what did Ted see when he looked at this picture?

Hockney's letter S, like a great fat serpent, rears up to fill the page. It is completely surrounded by line after line of small cursive s's which look very like those which might be written for practice in a child's school book. These are written with a soft red pencil. Each has a faint yellow shadow on its curved side and there are incomplete blue lines

running beneath them, like those in an exercise book.

Hockney S

The top end of the great serpentine S is rectangular and flared, like the mouth of a loud-speaker, and it balances on a similarly flared 'tail'. Its perimeter is formed by one continuous, fine, ink line with random dots along it, as if it were a dot-to-dot puzzle which has been completed. Two larger dots look as if Hockney's pen had blotted as he drew the outline.

Ted would, of course, have seen the letter 'S' in various forms, each of which represent a sound – a magical vibration of air which has the power, in our world, to communicate something: "Ssss!" and "Shhhh", for example.

It gives shape, meaning, emotive and motivating power to words like 'susurrat¹ion', 'secrecy', 'sea' and "snake". And it can radically change the meaning of a word by its presence, as in 'top' and 'STOP!'.

These airy vibrations, and this power of letters and words, are associated in religion with the breath of the Creator. In the Bible (John 1:1-2) we are told: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". And in Genesis (1:3): "God said Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness".

In Hebrew Cabbala, too, the Creator's breath brought about the first manifestation and the first division of Divine energy into all we know in the material world. And in the Hebrew alphabet the letter 'Shin', which is equivalent to our 'S', represents The Eternal Flame and has its own particular symbolic shape which incorporates the light from the Infinite Source with the Infinite within which all is contained². Ted would have known this from his exploration of Renaissance Christian Cabbala, which was the basis of Yeats' magic, and from his own study of Hebrew.

Ted's interest in the deep, non rational, magical (Ted's word) and communicative power of sound, was apparent in the work he did with Peter Brook, when he created the language of Orghast³.

And it is significant, too, that when he taught poetry to groups of bankers and accountants at the Liechtenstein Global Trust Academy in 1997 and 1998, the title which he chose for his course was "The Power of Words".

In ancient Greece, the magical vibrations of sound led Pythagoras to deduce the mathematical mysteries of ratio and number from the different tones he heard from hammers in a forge. He realised that there was a quantitative relationship between the tones, and that each tone was related to the others in an ordered way which could be given a numerical value. The whole world, according to his theory, consists of Harmony and Number and our musical scales reflect this.

In myth, too, sound and the secret of letters, words and writing are associated with the gods. Thoth gave us the hieroglyphs (literally meaning 'sacred symbols') from which our alphabet derives. And Mercury/Hermes brought us the gods' messages and also gave us music and poetry.

In Celtic myth, the flight of the Crane, which is sacred to the Goddess, embodies all the letters of the alphabet; and Manannan's crane-skin bag holds the inspiration and the words of the poets.

To get a little more abstruse, these vibrations of sound are, as Ted knew, powerful in magic. Not just in the magic of poetry where rhyme and rhythm, sibilance and assonance are vital to the life of the poem, but to magicians who vibrate the words of invocations and spells, and to priests and holy communities which chant and sing their liturgies and readings.

The magician, Franz Bardon, one of whose books Ted had in his library and recommended to friends, wrote that the S vibration has "all permeating power and all encompassing power" in which the "primordial divine fire" is present⁴.

For all these reasons, and especially because of Ted's interest in language and in the roots of language, and the experiments which he did with the Peter Brook's International Centre for Theatre Research, every letter would have had particular meaning for him and 'S', perhaps, was the most important.

But what else would Ted have seen in this picture?

He would have seen the serpentine shape of the letter, and the ocean of cursive 's's which surround it. That serpentine shape and the spots which mark it may well have reminded him of the charm the fairies sing in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to protect Titania from "Ye spotted snakes with double tongue", and from "newts and blind worms", "worm" and "snail"⁵.

He certainly saw, and described in his poem, something serpent-like which "lubricates the shape of air"; something hermaphrodite, like an eel, but which, here, is female. He saw a "sea-worm"; "an eel/ of strangest flesh"; something "nor snake nor fish". And he also saw the Goddess in her serpentine form – "the wordless eye/ of end and beginning" which "slid /out of her hole / in purest soul".

The serpent as a symbol is probably the oldest, most widespread and most potent in the world. It seems to inhabit every mythology and like the entwined snakes on Mercury's caduceus, it can be either deadly or benign.

In an interview in 1970, Ted told Ekbert Faas of his belief that powerful symbols have "real summoning force" and that he once wrote about a Red Cross Knight in order to control the possible effects of his "Jaguarish poem called 'Gog'". The symbol, he said, "opens up the readers own nature, and the way it works depends on the mind that

meets it – on the nature of that mind”⁶.

For Ted, the serpent appears to have had a very personal meaning. Not only because it is a symbol of the Goddess, but also because Ted, whose interest in astrology is well known, knew it as part of the constellation of Ophiuchos. Ophiuchos, “the serpent bearer”, is pictured as a man wrestling with the serpent and for the Greeks it represented the god Apollo wrestling with the huge snake that guarded the Oracle of Delphi. For some astrologers it is also the 13th sign of the zodiac.

In 1973 Ted wrote to Keith Sagar: “Your book made me regret the months and even years I’ve yielded to the serpent Ophiuchon – who always appeared to the day, when I had at last managed to take a real step. But he wasn’t always ugly”⁷. And in 1993, he wrote to William Scammell: “I’ve noticed, the closer you get to the real thing in any bout of writing, the more formidable are the perverse interruptions, the deflection, tempting diversions and sheer obstacular accidents. The Alchemists were so familiar with it, they gave it a name – Ophiucos i.e. the Great Snake (no less!)”⁸.

Ted’s poem, ‘Ophiuchos’, written between 1973 and 1974, was published in the Rainbow Press limited edition entitled ‘Orts’⁹. (a dialect word meaning ‘leavings’). It is a poem of threat and suffering; of “Soul torn from body”; and of “fire inexhaustible” which nevertheless, as in an alchemical process, is “fining” or purifying, the metal of a man.

And he referred to this alchemical snake again when he told Keith Sagar that “the whole drift” of the poems collected in the trade edition of Moortown was “the alchemizing of a phoenix out of a serpent. An awakening of life out of the unawakened”¹⁰. In this book, the poems are book-ended, so-to-speak, by Baskin’s images of a snake and a phoenix. Moortown CoverThe fanged, double-tailed snake, which is also on the cover of the book, rears up ominously on a page before the first poem ‘Rain’, which is a poem of watery desolation in which “The fox corpses lie beaten to their bare bones”. At the end of the book, Baskin’s great phoenix, with its head haloed by a sun or a moon, rises from its flames opposite ‘The Sole of the Foot’, Moortown Covera poem in which Adam stands firmly on the newly created earth, “the first host”, knowing that this is where he truly belongs.

It is apparent that the great sky-serpent Ophiuchos is double natured. And the constellation is also associated with Asclepius, god of healing, whose staff with its entwined snakes (like Mercury’s caduceus) has become a symbol of the medical profession, where poisons which may be lethal or healing are carefully controlled.

For all these reasons, in Ted’s eyes, Hockney’s serpentine letter ‘S’ would have been particularly powerful.

You can see that Ted captures the doubleness of Hockney’s picture in his poem. He captures the letter ‘S’ in the sibilance of the words; he hints at its shape in the “Swan of vision”; he captures the way we make the sound and its purpose as “the slug of speech” which “lubricates the shapes of air”. And he captures this strange, lithe, ambiguous

creature in his imagery.

But I believe he was doing more than this. Because Hockney's picture incorporates a letter and a symbol, both of which had huge meaning for Ted, I believe that with this poem Ted was creating a protective charm, to invoke, contain and balance the energies he saw there.

Letter S

This is what Ted's poem looks like on the page directly opposite Hockney's image. Unfortunately, for copyright reasons I cannot make the text legible here but the shape of the poem can be seen and the complete poems is reproduced in the Ted Hughes Society Journal. Vol.5, Issue 1, 2016.

Perhaps the first thing you notice about this poem is its cross-shape. Just as Ted created his Red Cross Knight to control the power he felt he had summoned in 'Gog', so he here placed a protective cross opposite the symbol of the snake. But the poem also looks rather like a mathematical division sign, with a unit of verse above and below the dividing lines of prose. It is a divided unity which exactly reflects the alchemical teaching of Hermes Trismegistus that "whatever is below is like that which is above, and whatever is above is like that which is below, to reflect the miracle of the one thing" – the 'one thing' being the alchemical gold of harmony, balance and spiritual wholeness.

Hermes Trismegistus, who is also Mercury/Thoth, is everywhere in Ted's poem. He is there in the live, lithe hermaphrodite creature which is neither snake nor fish. He is there in the doubleness which reflects the entwined snakes on his caduceus. He is also there in the spiral and the corkscrew, and in the sashaying, squirming mercurial eel. And he is there linking the heavens – the spirit of "purest soul" and the ghostly absence – with the material world of the surfaced sea-worm, with its pursed lips and its human sigh.

In Geomancy (which is serious Hebrew Cabbalistic numerology, not the debased numerology of popular culture) Mercury is given the number 8. The upper circle represents the heavens and the lower circle, connected to it but separated from it by the cross-over, represents the material world. Mercury links heaven and earth and the continuous line which forms the numeral 8 represents eternal continuity. Like the Uroborus – the snake biting its tail, which represents the continuity of Nature – the numeral 8 seamlessly joins beginning and end.

Similarly Ted's poem and the continuous outline of Hockney's serpentine 'S' join the beginning and the end.

But Mercury/Hermes himself is of double nature. He is both Psychopomp, the guide of souls, escorting the dead to the Otherworld, and Trickster. So Ted's serpentine sea-worm, "Depth charged" and surviving destruction is tricky – it opens its "purse/of lips for a kiss/with a human sigh" (you might interpret Hockney's image this way) only to "rear its hiss".

And there is trickery and deception in some of Ted's other images, too. "L'onde s'enfle dessous" is a suitably sibilant line which translates as 'the waves swelled beneath' and it beautifully describes the cursive sea of S's which surround Hockley large letter. It comes from Pierre Corneille's 17th-century French play based on the 12th century Castilian Lay of the Cid¹¹. And it comes from that part where Roderigo Diaz (El Cid) describes how he defeated the Moors by tricking them into an ambush.

Duplicity, deception and trickery are there in the Lusitania, too. There is a serpentine hiss at the heart of her name and, like an interloper in the Goddess's world, she began to dominate ocean crossings when, in 1907, as 'The Greyhound of the Seas', she became the fastest ship to cross the Atlantic. Her powerful engines, however, were so poorly configured and disturbed the waters so badly, that the ship was plagued by bad vibrations.

Such disrespect for the realm of the "great and malignant female", the "Mother of the sea-creatures, Spirit of the sea, Goddess of life and death", could, as Ted wrote in his essay on Coleridge, be very dangerous¹². She is, after all, the Ancient Mariner's "Nightmare Life-in-Death.../ Who thicks man's blood with cold"¹³.

Then, in May 1915, the Lusitania took on a double life. In defiance of international war-time laws, she was registered as a passenger-carrying Merchant Navy vessel but was secretly carrying a large cargo of munitions. Vibrations gave away her position to the German U-boat which torpedoed her. And vibrations, in the form of radio waves, also failed her when the two Royal Navy destroyers which had been deployed to protect her were unable to reach her. Although they could contact the captain by Wireless Telegraph, the encryption codes of the Royal Navy differed from those used by the Merchant Navy, and the captain would not give them his position in uncoded transmission. So, they did not know her exact position.

This strikes me as a particularly Mercurial trick, since Mercury who is, of course, the God of communications and the icon of the telecommunication industry, made a childhood promise to his father, Zeus, that he would always tell the truth - but not necessarily the whole truth¹⁴.

Whether or not these things were in Ted's mind when he included the reference to the Lusitania and his quotation from El Cid in this poem, is of course speculation. They are puzzling inclusions – part of what Spender called Ted's "winding journey" through a "lifetime of surreal associations". Such obscurities, however, do not make for a good poem.

This poem has none of the simple clarity of Ted's best work but it does capture the essence of Hockney's picture and it does balance past and present, history and myth, spirit and body, the beginning and the end. It is, I think, a fine example of Ted's use of the power of words to create a magical, protective charm.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTED HUGHES: THE POETIC QUEST
Ann Skea

Ouroborus

University of New England Press, 1994.

This book examines Cave Birds, Remains of Elmet and River, and shows how Hughes used myth, mysticism and alchemy as a magical, transforming power in his poetry.

The author draws on her own correspondence with Hughes and on previously unpublished material from original manuscripts. She examines Hughes' own beliefs, as expressed in his extensive prose writing and, she discusses many of Hughes' poems in detail.

Illustrations from alchemical manuscripts and from the works of William Blake complement the text. There is also an informative bibliography, an index of poems and a good general index.

"I was highly impressed by the thorough and penetrating account of the poems concerned. It showed me that my own reading of them had been very shallow indeed. The grasp of both local details and of the broader conception of each book in turn convinced me utterly". (Extract from a letter to the author from Christopher Reid, former Poetry Editor at Faber and Faber Ltd., Ted Hughes' British publishers)

This book is currently out of print but a few copies are still available from the author (e-mail: ann@skea.com). It can also be read on these pages as an e-book

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Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional "O Lady": Hughes and his Muse

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"O Lady", Hughes wrote in his very early poem 'Song' (THCP 24–5), "You stood, and your shadow was my place: / You turned, your shadow turned to ice". So, he gave his heart to the Goddess, knowing already the enthralling wonder of her presence, her fickleness, and the desolation of losing her. She was his Muse, his Moon Goddess, Nature, governor of the wind and the waves and Mistress of the animals, and throughout his work he remained faithful to her.

Heartfelt as this early poem is, Hughes was following a long poetic tradition by dedicating himself and his work to the Goddess. The Greeks had called on the nine Muses to inspire their poetry and drama, often entreating just one of them for help: "Rage – goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles," demanded Homer in the opening lines of the Iliad; and at the beginning of the Odyssey – "Tell me Muse, of the man of many ways, who was driven / far journeys"¹.

VenusAphrodite

Roman poets followed suit, adapting Greek mythology and gods to their own ends. "O

Muse!", cries Virgil at the start of the Aeneid, when he calls on her to relate the causes and crimes which have roused Juno's "unrelenting hate" of "so brave, so just a man" as Paris, and asks her to help him "sing" his story².

Then, as Greek and Roman texts began to circulate in Renaissance Europe, the Muses, as Joseph Campbell puts it, became for poets and painters "the openers of the senses to the music of the spheres"³.

The Renaissance poets, in their turn, influenced English poetry, and Hughes dated his first introduction to the Goddess to his teenage years when, as he told Drue Heinz, he read "the whole of the *The Faerie Queene*" as he sat in the woods "muttering through" his poetry books. And "All of Milton"⁴. Edmund Spenser, claiming to be inspired by the "sacred Muse", began *The Faerie Queene* by calling on her as "O holy Virgin, chief of nine" to help "Thy weaker Noyce to perform thy will"⁵. And, following the Classical tradition, the opening words of Milton's *Paradise Lost* are "Sing heavenly Muse".

Hughes' early familiarity with the works of Spenser, Milton, Chaucer, Shelley and Shakespeare, gave him the somewhat romantic and traditional view of the Muse which is evident in 'Song'. But it is very likely that he also read the Roman poet Lucretius's *De rerum natura* (*Of the Nature of Things*), which had been translated by Milton and from which Spenser had published extracts. This poem, which influenced English poets from the sixteenth century on, is again addressed to Venus, but unlike many poems addressed to the Goddess or the Muses it describes her role in Nature. It is She who provides the "primal germs" from which Nature, Mother Earth, "all creates and multiplies / And fosters all, and wither she resolves / Each in the end when each is overthrown". She holds the secret power of birth, procreation, death and renewal (all of which became the powers of the Goddess who is central to Hughes' work) and Lucretius exhorts Memmius, to whom his lessons are addressed, to marvel at Nature's wonders, as he himself does in some of his most beautiful passages of poetry.

Artemis of Ephesus

Hughes' early "sacred canon" of poets included Wordsworth and Coleridge, both of whom turned to Nature for inspiration⁶, and Hughes' Goddess was always the Goddess of Nature. His early hunting experiences with his older brother had immersed him in her world and he had grown very familiar with it. Animals, he told Drue Heinz, "were there at the beginning. Like parents. Since I spent my first seventeen or eighteen years constantly thinking about them, more or less, they became a language – a symbolic language which is also the language of my whole life"⁷.

Already, when writing 'Hawk Roosting' (THCP 68) and 'Pike' (THCP 84) Hughes saw elements of the divine in Nature's creations and used his poems to summon the Goddess's energies into our world. In response to questions by Faas, he said, "I wanted to focus my natural world – those familiars of my boyhood – in a 'divine' dimension. I wanted to express my sense of that... I was trying to express what had been with me from the beginning"⁸. And when questioned by Faas about supposed violence in his two Jaguar poems, he said "I prefer to think of them as first, descriptions of a jaguar, second

... invocations of the Goddess”⁹.

All this was tempered by Hughes’ growing familiarity with other Goddesses, “supernatural women” and “underworld women” of which he read in folk-lore and mythologies, especially those of Celtic Ireland and Wales, the Middle East and Egypt. And, until he was given Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess*, as a school-leaving present, he had, he said, regarded “such arcane” interests as his personal and private territory. “I had a turmoiling sort of baffled constant meditation going on all that”, he wrote to Nick Gammage, “with various tunnels of special effects, Indian, Chinese and Japanese. And I suppose I’d worked out a kind of relationship to it all”¹⁰. So, when he first “met *The White Goddess* in September 1951”, he felt resentful that Graves had seemingly taken possession of his “secret patch”. Nevertheless, he recognised that he and Graves “shared an obsession” and he “soaked the book up”. Its effect, however, he believed to be largely shaped by his even earlier absorption of the theory of Jung’s *Psychological Types*, and he had, he said, “read Graves through Jung” and understood Graves’ analysis of various myths as a description of something which “had its roots in biology”¹¹.

Hughes was never convinced that Graves’ own occult, Muse-inspired, poetry did not impose “some kind of witty dry distance... between him and the sacred event”. But he acknowledged that Graves’ book, together with his own early love of Blake and the influence of Jung’s works had “given him the bigger picture fairly early”. And Graves’ extensive knowledge of world mythology and, especially, what he wrote about the traditions of the Celtic Ollave, or master poet, and what he describes as “the constant poetic theme”, clearly influenced Hughes.

This Theme (Graves capitalises it) is “the antique story... of the birth, life, death and resurrection of the God of the Waxing Year”, who fights “a losing battle with the God of the Waning Year for love of the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess, their mother, bride and layer-out”. The poet, wrote Graves, “identifies himself with the God of the Waxing Year and his Muse with the Goddess” and every true poem “is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust – the female spider or the queen-bee whose embrace is death”¹². She is Nature, “mistress and governess of all the elements”, “chief of the powers divine” controller of “the planets of the sky, the wholesome winds of the seas, and the lamentable silences of hell”¹³. It is not hard to imagine the attraction of this imaginative description for the young Hughes; and because of his interest in magic and mysticism he would certainly have warmed to Graves’ description of his book as rediscovering “a set of sacred charms of varying antiquity” which pertain to the poet’s relationship with the Muse¹⁴.

Isis

Hughes also read Graves’ translation of another influential Latin work, Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*. Not only was Athanasius Kircher’s picture (c.1670) of Apuleius’s Isis – “*Magnae Deorum Matris*”, “she that is the natural mother of all, mistresse and governess of all the Elements, the initial progeny of worlds, chief of powers divine” –

hung on the wall of his and Sylvia's London flat, he also chose it for the gold-embossed cover of his Rainbow Press publication, *Poems*¹⁵.

Graves' detailed and complicated arguments about the Celtic Tree Alphabet find no place in Hughes' work, but the Goddess is there in her many forms. Present, too, is the Gravesian theme of the warring twins: the battle between the God of the Waxing Year (who is the poet) and his twin, the God of the Waning Year (who is the poet's rival, "his blood-brother, his other self, his weird"¹⁶). This inner struggle to be worthy of the love of the capricious and all-powerful Goddess is expressed in Hughes' early poem 'Fair Choice' (THCP 31–2), where it is described as a battle of choice between "rivalling eithers" – twins who are both elements of the one person, so that "The spilt blood be your own" and the "cold murder of one" results in the need to "force-feed / With your remorse the other and protect him / From the vengeful voluble ghost of the dead twin".

This doppelganger emerges most vividly in Hughes' poem 'The Gulkana' (THCP 665). Hughes wrote that he "pre-dreamed the events which inspired this poem" where, in an ancient, primitive and unstable landscape, he feels the gaze of "A bodiless twin, some disinherited being / And doppelganger other" watching him – "the interloper, / the fool he had always hated"¹⁷. Appropriately, this poem is part of the River sequence, which traces the whole cycle of Nature through its annual pattern of birth, procreation, death and regeneration¹⁸. There, the Goddess herself is mother, bride, hag and layer-out: and the river "is a god, and inviolable / Immortal", who, "Fallen from heaven, lies across/ The lap of his mother" as in a pieta ('The River', THCP 664). In 'Japanese River Tales' (THCP 641) she enters the river as the "juicy bride" of the river god, seductively "touching /At her hair", "naked under / Her robe, jewels / In her hair, in her ears, at her bare throat"; but her "kiss" is death, and her "talons" "numb open / The long belly of blood" before she departs "Through the shutter of space and / Out of being". Her powers and energies are everywhere, in the plants, the birds, the insects and, especially, in the fish, which fill these River poems.

Human beings are incidental in the Goddess's world. Like the fisherman persona of these poems, Man is an interloper, a watcher, an intruding "man shape" ('Strangers', THCP 658) in a dangerously alien realm. The men milking the salmon for eggs and milt in 'The Morning before Christmas' (THCP 639–640) are 'farming' salmon, helping along a creative process which "in natural times" and "with great luck" would occur without any human intervention. They are as irrelevant to the Goddess's world as the old Noh dancer performing an ancient, remembered ritual in a fish-less, dying river ('Eighty, and Still Fishing for Salmon' (THCP 674). In only one poem, 'Go fishing' (THCP 652), is he the poet/shaman wading "in underbeing", immersing himself in the Goddess's world where he must "Cease", and be assumed into the endless "plasma healing" flow before crawling back "new and nameless" to "Heal into time, and other people".

Discussing his belief in the "medicinal, healing" power of art, Hughes told Drue Heinz, "Prose narrative etcetera, can carry this healing. Poetry does it more intensely. Music maybe most intensely of all"¹⁹. And, in seeking to use and transmit this healing power, the shamanic aspect of Hughes' negotiations with the Goddess became an essential

part of his work.

He would have come across shamanism and “techniques of moving in a state of ecstasy among various spiritual realms”(WP 56) through his early interest in Yeats’ occult activities and from his own extensive reading of occult material. And he would have learned of shamanism, and of the widespread belief in and worship of the primitive and ancient mother–goddesses, during his anthropology studies at Cambridge University²⁰.

It is very likely, too, that Hughes read Eric Dodds’ book *The Greeks and the Irrational*, several copies of which are in the Pembroke College library, including a first edition (published in 1951) in which the many passages which discuss poetry, shamanism and divinely–inspired madness are marked with pencilled lines, ticks or brackets. One ticked note refers to the Muse as the revealer of “hidden truths”²¹.

The shamanic flight, as Hughes told Faas, “is the skeleton of thousands of folktales and myths. And of many narrative poems”. And Hughes’ own narrative poetic sequences, *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet*, *River*, *Gaudete* and even *Birthday Letters*, can all be seen as shamanic flights to the spirit world – the “underbeing” of ‘*Go Fishing*’ – to bring back “a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community’s affairs”²². It was a flight Hughes believed to be necessary because of our increasing alienation from the natural world, and because, as he wrote in ‘*The Enviromental Revolution*’, Nature “is the mother of all life” and when we lose touch with Nature we enter “an evolutionary dead-end”(WP 128-35).

Hughes’ very early introduction to the work of Carl Jung not only affected the way in which he read Graves’ *The White Goddess*, it also introduced him to the concept of the unconscious mind – the shadow self – where sensation and intuition function in the human psyche. And it emphasised the need to balance this ‘irrational’ (often called ‘female’) part of our nature with the conscious, rational (so-called ‘male’) part. So, he understood Graves’ arguments about the suppression of the female Goddess by the male God, and his discussions of the warring brothers and their relationship with the poet and his Muse, through Jung’s teachings²³. Hughes’ lengthy analysis in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* of the “Tragic Equation” which develops between the jealous Goddess and her lovers, demonstrates the dangerous effects of repressing the unconscious energies²⁴. And, in *A Dancer to God*, he describes in detail his view that the doppelganger – “this other self”, this “possibly poetic self” – “may represent and may even contain...the true–self, the self at the source, the inmost core of the individual, which the Upanishads call the divine self”, communion with which is “healing, redeems the suffering life and releases joy”²⁵.

Jung’s writing about alchemy and about symbols also influenced Hughes’ dealings with his Muse. From Jung’s *Psychology and Alchemy*, Hughes learned the psychological explanations for ‘individuation’, examination of all aspects of ‘self’, the purging of gross elements within that self which cause imbalance, and the harmonious ‘marrying’ of the male and female parts of the psyche. It would have been important to Hughes that the

symbolism of alchemy, especially the images drawn in early alchemical texts, derive from Nature, the Goddess who links the Creative Source with our World, and who transmits and controls the universal energies. Important, too, would have been Jung's ideas about the archetypal meaning of symbols and the psychological power they embody.

Two other major influences are apparent in Hughes' dealings with the Goddess.

Triple Goddess

One was his discovery in 1973–4 of A.K. Ramanujan's *Speaking of Siva*²⁶, translations of the *vacanas* (sacred songs) of the Siva-worshipping mystics of Southern India. The other was his growing understanding of the use of Cabbala, by which the female aspect of God, the Shekinah of Hebrew Cabbala who is exiled in our world, is re-united with the male Godhead.

In the *vacanas* in Ramanujan's book, Hughes found the same simple, direct, honest speech as that of his own early poem 'Song'. Their tone, however, was very different. These Indian mystics regarded themselves as married to Siva, and they spoke to him as they would to a beloved but recalcitrant spouse – not only adoring him but castigating, pleading, questioning, gossiping, arguing, and berating him as if he were their conjugal partner. Hughes began to experiment with this brief, concise form of poetry, addressing himself to his Goddess as "Lady of the Hill", rather than to Lord Siva. Gradually, as he filled a notebook, his poems developed from close copies of particular *vacanas* into hymns to the Goddess which were completely his own. Some of these poems became part of the Epilogue in *Gaudete*²⁷, others were published in *Orts*²⁸, but many are still uncollected²⁹.

In these poems, Hughes' understanding of his Muse and his way of addressing her are very different to those of the adolescent Hughes of 'Song', but she is still the Goddess of Nature. Sometimes, she is cruel as "the eye of a hare" which "Strips the interrogator naked"³⁰; at other times he sees her as "An unearthly woman wading shoreward / With me in your arms"³¹. Her devotee despairs of her fickleness, asking "Why did you make me / Support me this long and this far / Just to forget me now?"³²; and at other times she so annoys him that he feels "stuck in marriage, like a decaying tooth / In an imbecile's mouth"³³. He has also come to understand the dangers of giving his heart to her, knowing, too late, that it is "Better, happier to stay clear of the pure / Water of the source"³⁴.

Amongst the *vacanas* in the *Gaudete* Epilogue, Hughes chose to include, for the first time, poems which refer to particular women in his life, thereby identifying them with the Goddess. Referring to the Reverend Lumb, whose adventures he charted in *Gaudete*, Hughes told Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts that in the Epilogue poems: "Lumb adds up several women in his life, assuming them, as he does so, into that female in the other world (or hidden in this world). Naturally", he went on, "I could only lend him people I have known"³⁵. The woman in 'I know well' (THCP 368), for example, was Sue Alliston, a friend who lived, as Hughes once had, in 18 Rugby Street and who was dying of

Hodgkin's disease³⁶. The poem which begins 'Once I said lightly' refers to Sylvia Plath; and 'Waving goodbye from your banked hospital bed/...' refers to his mother³⁷. So, Hughes began the practice which he would later adopt more fully in *Capriccio*, *Howls & Whispers* and *Birthday Letters* where, just as Dante chose Beatrice, Sir Philip Sidney chose Stella, Edmund Spenser chose Queen Elizabeth I, and Shakespeare's chose his 'Dark Lady' as their poetic representatives of the Goddess, Hughes chose Assia Wevill and Sylvia Plath.

"Every living woman", as Hughes wrote in one of his uncollected *vacanas*, represents a test which the Goddess sets for the human male. Every living woman embodies the Goddess. So, in Hughes' poetry real women are all representatives of the Goddess, and it is notable that never, even in *Birthday Letters*, *Howls & Whispers* and *Capriccio* (in which Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill are clearly re-created and brought to life in the poems by memory and imagination) are the women named.

Hughes' adoption of Hebrew Cabbala as a framework for *Capriccio*, *Howls & Whispers* and *Birthday Letters*, represented another stage in his negotiations with the Goddess and in his shamanic endeavor to bring healing energies into our world³⁸. In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he described the Cabbalistic Tree of Life as a mnemonic device, the symbols of which encompass "all the possibilities of existence"; and he saw it as "the most formidably established and sophisticated, the most awesome in occult reputation, of all memory maps,...operated by techniques of meditation that at the very least [are] like divine prayer whilst at the highest they resemble communion with supernatural beings, if not with the Divine Emanation itself" (SGCB 21). So, through the use of techniques which rely on meditation, memory and imagery, Hughes sought to channel his poetic energies into those sequences. This became his shamanic method of contacting his poetic self, the Other who in his tribute to T.S.Eliot, he described as the "secularized, privatized...keeper of dreams" – the doppelganger which represents the "divine" self (WP 274–5).

In *Birthday Letters*, his purpose, too, was the same as that which he had ascribed to both Yeats and Eliot: he set out to create "a human endeavor" which is "privately personal at the one extreme and more universally public at the other"(WP 273). By re-memorizing Sylvia and Assia and examining deeply and alchemically every aspect of his relationship with them he not only identified the human errors and the failure of unconditional love in their mutual relationships, he also created a human and gripping poetic narrative. 20,000 people bought *Birthday Letters* when it was first published. Not all of them read it simply out of prurient interest. And many who read it right through discovered things which they identified with, and were moved by it – and changed by it. That is shamanic poetic magic at its most powerful.

Uroborus

In *Birthday Letters*, in the final stage of the Cabbalist journey which the poet/persona began as a child "stupid with confidence, in the playclothes / Of still growing"³⁹, he returns to The World (Malkuth), the station on the Cabbalistic Tree from which he began, thus completing the circle which is represented by the symbol for the Goddess,

Nature – the Uroborus – the snake eating its tail. Ted as pilgrim/shaman/poet had made this journey many times in many different ways, searching, through alchemy, shamanism, Cabbala, myth and legend, for his Muse's energies. He found them most truthfully in Nature, but not until Birthday Letters had he been able to bring together enough knowledge, understanding and poetic power to create the healing magic which freed him and made the last months of his life "totally his own"⁴⁰.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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2. Virgil, *The Aeneid* (19 BC), Anonymous volunteers and Widger, D. (trans.) (Gutenberg Project, Ebook), Canto 1.
3. Campbell, J. *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 80.
4. Hughes T. 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry No. 71', Interview with Drue Heinz in *The Paris Review*, Spring, 1995, No.134, pp. 55-94.
5. Spenser, E. *The Faerie Queene*, Wauchope, R.A. (ed.) (Gutenberg Ebook), Book 1. Canto 1.
6. Hughes T. *The Paris Review*, op.cit. By the time I got to university, at twenty-one, my sacred canon was fixed: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Marlowe, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, Hopkins, Yeats, Eliot".
7. Ibid.
8. Faas, E. *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 202.
9. Ibid. p. 199.
10. Ted Hughes to Nick Gammage, 7 April 1995 in Reid, C. (ed.), *The Letters of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber, 2007). p. 679.
11. This book belonged to his sister, Olwyn. Later, as he told Ekbert Faas (op.cit. p.37), he read all Jung's translated volumes. Jung's works are present in his library at Emory University, Atlanta, USA.
12. Graves, R. *The White Goddess* (London: Faber 1977), pp. 21–26.
13. Ibid. p. 72.
14. Ibid. p. 25.
15. Graves, R. *The Transformation of Lucius: otherwise known as the golden Ass* (London: Penguin 1950). Sylvia wrote to her mother of "a lovely engraving of Isis from one of Ted's astrological books" (SPLH 7 Feb. 1960). Quotation from Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Asse* (Addlington's translation 1566), London: Simpkin Marshall Ltd. 1934) p. 219. *Poems: Ted Hughes, Ruth Fainlight, Alan Sillitoe* (London: Rainbow Press Limited Edition 1971).
16. Ibid. p. 24.
17. Reid, C. (ed.) op.cit. Note to a letter from Hughes to Nick Gammage, 10 October 1998. p.734.
18. Hughes, T. *River* (London: Faber, 1983).
19. *The Paris Review*, op.cit.
20. In a letter to Moelwyn Merchant (29 June 1990) Hughes wrote that he had "discovered the literature of Shamanism" at University. And it is likely that he attended the lectures of Dr Ethel John Lingren, an authority on shamanism in Manchuria, who, as

Robert Leighton reveals in 'What did Ted Learn from Anthropology?' (a paper he presented at the Royal Anthropological Institute in June 2015), lectured in anthropology at Cambridge University when Ted was an undergraduate there.

21. Dodds, E. *The Greeks and the Irrational*, University of California Press, Berkley, 1951, p.101, note 121. Dodds was a Classicist and Regius Professor of Greek at the University of Oxford, he had met W.B. Yeats and he had a lifelong interest in mysticism, poetry and psychic research. Hughes was an undergraduate student at Pembroke at the time this book was first published and, since these pencil-marked passages exactly reflect his particular interests and not necessarily those of Classics scholars, it is tempting (but unprovable) to suggest that he made them.

22. Faas, E, op.cit. p. 206.

23. Ted Hughes to Nick Gammage, 7 April 1995. in *The Letters of Ted Hughes*, op.cit. p. 679. "My sister (my pathfinder) had bought *Psychological Types* and that was one book I knew backwards – the theory of it – before I went to University. So I read Graves through Jung".

24. Hughes, T, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber, 1992), passim.

25. Hughes, T, *A Dancer to God* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 27–8. Also published as 'The Poetic Self: A Centenary Tribute to T.S. Eliot' (WP 214–7).

26 Ramanujan, A. J, *Speaking of Siva* (London, Penguin Classics, 1973).

27. Hughes, T. *Gaudete* (London: Faber, 197), pp. 176–200.

28. Hughes, T. *Orts*, (Rainbow Press Limited Edition, 1978). Also in *Moortown* (London: Faber, 1979), pp. 132–149.

29. For a detailed discussion of these poems see Skea, A. 'Ted Hughes' Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom' in *Ted Hughes : Cambridge to Collected*, M. Wormald, N. Roberts, T. Gifford (eds.), (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 81–95. Also online at [.THVacanas.html](http://THVacanas.html).

30. 'The primrose petal's edge', THCP 364.

31. 'The rain comes again', THCP 362.

32. 'Your eyes are poor', THCP 404.

33. 'Before I was born', THCP 403.

34. 'Better, happier to stay clear', THCP 405.

35. Hughes' notes to Gifford and Roberts included in a partly unpublished letter to Keith Sagar, 4 Oct. 1979. British Library Add. Mss. 78756.

36. Like Sylvia Plath, Sue Alliston appears in '18 Rugby St.' in *Birthday Letters* (THCP 1055).

37. Neil Roberts notes that both Rand Brandes and Len Scigaj suggested that both these poems refer to Sylvia Plath (Roberts, N. *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2006), Note. 52, p. 228). William Scammell, in an article in *The Poetry Review*, op.cit. 'Burst Open Under Blue–Black Pressure' also made this claim. Hughes, however, specifically denied that 'waving goodbye...' is about Sylvia Plath. In a telephone conversation with me shortly before his death he confirmed that it was about his mother, Edith Farrar Hughes.

38. This framework is examined in detail in 'Poetry and Magic' 1, 2 and 3: (web addresses: *Birthday Letters* [.BLCabala.htm](http://BLCabala.htm); *Howls & Whispers*: [.HWCabala.htm](http://HWCabala.htm) and *Capriccio*: [.CapriccioHome.htm](http://CapriccioHome.htm))

39. 'Caryatids 2', THCP 1046.

40. Letter from Carol Hughes to Ann Skea (8 November 1999). The actual publication of Birthday Letters, just ten months before Ted died, finally gave him this feeling of total freedom.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 Transitional 'The Calm' by Ted Hughes: Notes and Précis of a 'lost' Play.

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Addendum, November 2016:

Robin Skelton archive, University of Victoria, B.C. (SC114). Seven lines of autograph manuscript above a much corrected fragment of Dully Gumption's Addendum appear to contain a first attempt at beginning the 'lost' play The Calm. The characters are Fat and (almost illegible but later designated simply by 'W') Walter. Some of these lines appear in later versions of the opening of the play, where the dialogue is between Fat and Fred. Walter does not appear at all in any of the other known fragments of the play.

Ted Hughes' play, 'The Calm', dates from 1961. It is almost certain that it was never performed, but in November 1961 there was a public reading of it at The Poets' Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

Diane Middlebrook (Her Husband, Penguin, 2000) refers to a letter from Peter Davison to Ted Hughes, 4 Dec. 1961 (Emory Archive): Davison "who was regularly accepting work by Plath and Hughes for publication in Atlantic Monthly, wrote that he and his wife had attended the reading and "were fascinated by the strange simplicity of the language, with shapeless forms crouching just beyond earshot". They left the theatre "baffled but reflective", Davison added".

Reference Note: p.316: "Apparently Peter Hall rejected 'The Calm'. It was never produced, and the typescript was jettisoned into the common pool of scrap paper in the Hughes household..."

The Poets' Theatre, established in 1950, staged plays by young poets and dramatists. Many of the world's most influential writers presented their work and performed in their productions. "The theatre survived in one form or another until October 1968 when the small building it occupied on Palmer Street in Cambridge burned down".

(<https://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/pt.html>.)

The surviving records of the theatre and are held in Harvard University Library. (Call No.: MS Thr 833). No holding of 'The Calm' is listed.

No complete copy of the play has been found but fragments of manuscripts and

typescript are known to exist at:

Smith College, North Hampton, MS, USA.

Emory University, Atlanta, GA, USA.

The British Library, London, UK.

University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada.

Ben Sonnenberg archive, Columbia University, New York City, NY, USA.

One speech was published:

'Maureen's Speech' in the play, and titled as such in a draft which Hughes sent to Ben Sonnenberg, was published as 'The Rescue' in the Atlantic Monthly, March 1962. It appears under this same title in Wodwo, Faber, 1971, p.36–37; and in Ted Hughes: Collected Poems, p.157.

There are references to 'The Calm' in:

Reid, C (Ed.), The Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007. p.183. Ted Hughes to Aurelia and Warren Plath, 8 May 1961:

"I'm just finishing a play – a real play. No resemblance to that other at all. 8 people wake up on a desert island without memory – or with only floating fragments of memory. I'll send it to the poets' theatre so you'll be able to see it. Though it may be good enough to go further – & it may not. There's a good chance of a good performance over here – the best director in England is interested in it (he hasn't seen it yet)."

Plath, A (Ed.) Sylvia Plath: Letters Home, Faber 1999, p. 416 and p.418. Sylvia to Aurelia Plath, 5 April 1961:

"Best of all, he's been commissioned by Peter Hall (Director of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and husband of Leslie Caron) for a play for their London company. This is an incredible stroke of luck, as only very well-known playwrights have been commissioned so far, and it means the play Ted is working on will have the best reading and if it's good enough to produce, the best cast and production it could have.

We are thrilled by this – we have yet to hear just how much money it is – because it meant that Ted's plays will go straight to the best director in England for a reading, and even if this one is not accepted (we have to keep telling ourselves this to calm down, because we think it's a superb play, which we'll send to the Poets' Theatre as well, so you may have a chance to see it, too!), the next ones, no doubt, will be."

Sylvia to Aurelia Plath, 8 May 1961.

"We are both working very hard. Ted is typing his five-act play and has got past the 100-page mark..."

Middlebrook, D. Her Husband, Penguin, 2000, pp.137-8.

Peter Hall, Artistic Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company "also developed productions for two London theatres, the Aldwych... and the Arts Theatre Club in Soho, a smaller house in which he hoped to showcase new talent". He asked Hughes "to submit a play to be considered for the 1962 season".

Hughes "immediately went back to work on a three-act play he already had under the title 'The Calm'. The setting was a desert island; the characters were eight castaways

from a shipwreck who retained only faint and intermittent recollections of their past lives. Plath told her mother that Hughes was writing the “dark opposite of Shakespeare’s *Tempest*” (Letter to AP 26 Feb. 1961. Lilly Library). “... the action of the play seems to take place on the banks of the river Acheron (from classical myth, the river in the underworld where spirits gather after death), with a band of survivors attempting to pool its memories in order for each to recover a sense of self, under the leadership of a superior being called The Helper. A baby is discovered and brought into their midst at some point, supplying the possibility of a new start”.

Sylvia to Aurelia Plath, 14 April 1961.

Middlebrook quotes a currently unpublished letter from the Lilly Library in which Sylvia wrote that Ted had almost finished his “huge 5–act play called ‘The Calm’”.

Sagar, K (Ed.), *The Achievement of the Ted Hughes*, Manchester University Press, 1983. Fred Rue Jacobs, ‘Hughes and Drama’. p. 158:

“Oedipus is the one play Hughes still considered ‘serious’, because it gave him ‘an idea of what the level of intensity must be’. Only in the all–but–lost ‘The Calm’ did Ted feel the same command, and then just in the first scene, after which, he complains, he ‘just had to go on and finish it’.”

Reference Note 19. p.366: “telephone interview with Hughes” [undated].

Bate, J. *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life*, HarperCollins, 2015, p.175.

“His latest project was a play called ‘The Calm’, a modernised reworking of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in which everyone stayed on the magical island and the characters – Prospero, Caliban, Ariel and even Caliban’s witch–mother Sycorax – were all aspects of the same self”.

(Reference: “mentioned in a letter to John Fisher and family. April 1961.” p. 586.)

Index, p.641: “‘The Calm’ (TH: radio play)”

What follows is a précis of the play as I have reconstructed it from my own transcription of the manuscript pages and from typescripts. I have relied on contextual clues and page numbers to make this reconstruction. However, a number of pages are missing, many pages are unnumbered and some passages of dialogue reappear on several differently numbered pages.

‘The Calm’ was never a radio play. And, in spite of Plath’s letter to her mother, and Hughes’ letter to John Fisher in which he refers to it as “an up–to–date inversion” of *The Tempest*, there is no clearly identifiable relationship between ‘The Calm’ and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, other than the fact that it concerns castaways on an island. Diane Middlebrook’s suggested interpretation of the play, based on fewer fragments than have been viewed for this précis, is unsustainable.

SCENE:

All the action takes place inside or immediately outside a wooden beach–house.

Outside: A wood–bin is situated along one side of the house, and in a late scene a sundial has been built. Inside: The house has big doors which open onto a wide porch.

Through the windows can be seen sand and dunes, brown grass and a flat, silent sea. There is an inset kitchen with pots and pans, and an oil stove. There is a tap with water. In the floor is a trap-door to a cellar. Furniture includes a rocking chair, a table with chairs, and a candelabra with candles. In one corner of the room there is a bundle of sacks.

CAST, IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:

Fred: About 20, dressed like a conventional castaway – ragged shirt and pants, bare feet.

Fat: Undescribed. Last memory: of being a truck-driver on the York to London run and stopping at Stamford.

Magark: Enters wearing a bowler hat, dark overcoat open, dark suit-jacket open, carrying a briefcase. Bald. Smokes cigars. Last memory: being a butcher in Cirencester High Street, but his briefcase identifies him as K Magark of Magark & Son, Auction, House, Land and Estate Agency Offices. Manchester.

Minnie Middlewick

Arthur Middlewick: Undescribed. Enter together. Husband and wife, querulous, bickering, acquisitive. Magark calls them 'the old couple'.

Sirin: Undescribed. Enters running along the beach, terrified. Open raincoat, suit-jacket open, shirt open, tie dangling. Magark later describes his 'shark smile'.

Maureen: Undescribed. Similar age to Fred. Entry – page missing. Fred claims to recognise her. She does not recognise him.

The Helper: Undescribed. Found in the house under the heap of sacks. Enigmatic. Mysterious. Claims to have been on the island with five others who were rescued. Suggest ways of coping based on his experience. Manipulative. Unreliable.

Bertha: Undescribed. Bursts out of the cellar when the trap-door is opened, weeping, confused and disorientated. Young, big-breasted. Fat refers to her as 'a flippin' jewess'.

A Baby: Is heard crying at intervals throughout the play. It is brought in by The Helper just before the play ends. Female.

SCENE 1:

Fat and Fred meet at the house and warily check each other out. Fred claims to have walked all round the island in ten minutes. Neither remembers how they got there, anything of their past or even their names.

They agree to shout for help. They hear a baby crying, and are worried by the silence, the stillness and a feeling of being watched. They discover the tap with fresh water and

they drink. Magark appears from the distance, mistaking them for the owners of the house. He, too, has no memory but he blusters and invents a gory past as a butcher. He seems to revel in the bloody details. Only on looking in his briefcase does he discover his name and that he is part of an Estate Agent's business. He begins inventing a new past and a scenario for why he is there and how he got there. Fat and Fred ridicule his story.

They worry about food and hear the baby crying again. Minnie and Arthur Middlewick appear, eating sandwiches. They, too, have no memories. Minnie notes the strange silence, the heat and the absence of seagulls. Magark approaches them and persuades them to share their sandwiches, of which he surreptitiously eats most. Sirin appears, terrified as if running from something horrific. They sooth him and give him water. The baby is heard again. Magark embarks on a long fanciful speech which seems to be drawn from fragments of mis-remembered history, geography and politics – it is absurd and slightly mad.

[missing pages]

Maureen and Fred meet. He recognizes her but she does not know him. Her memory, too, has completely gone. Sirin has been asleep and wakes. Magark sums up the situation – that they are all marooned on an island about two yards across. Fat points out that Magark, too, is part of the 'game'.

The Middlewicks begin to worry. They all introduce themselves to each other. Maureen accepts Fred's name for her but is unsure about it.

They discuss the island. Fred claims to have searched every inch of it and it is nothing but sand-dunes and grass. However, they point out that he didn't find them. They argue, are confused, decide to shout for help. They shout and hear a confusing echo. Then they see the sacks in the corner move.

Magark thinks it is a rat – meat – possible food. He organizes them to kill it. He has a weapon of some kind but instructs them, if he misses, to stamp on it and kill it in any way possible. They pull the sacks away and The Helper is revealed. He has been asleep but wakes and is very excited to see people. When questioned he claims to have been there 'too long' and 'long enough'. He is unnaturally jubilant and claims that now they are here there is hope.

They ply him with questions. Who is he? How can they be saved? He just laughs. They ask about the baby. He nods and laughs, then opens his mouth and makes a baby cry.

SCENE II:

The Helper has told them about five previous castaways, three men and two women. He claims that they were rescued and he missed the boat. They ask him how these five got along. He tells them that they organised it, learned, and loved each other, and that

they got off quite whole because they loved each other.

The Helper goes off to search the island for possible others. They remember that they didn't ask him about food and call him back. He suggests that they look in the cellar, which they had not noticed. They find the cellar trap-door, open it, and Bertha bursts out weeping and bewildered. She claims she just went down there to put a shilling in the gas-meter. Fat exclaims at the appearance of a flippin' jewess.

[An un-numbered fragment which seems not to have been kept as part of the play may offer a different scenario for the appearance of Bertha. Alternatively, with the return of Maureen's memory, a breeze, and a Red Cross Knight, it may have been part of a final scene. Fred and Maureen enter a room in the house and find Bertha and a man who is recognized by Maureen as 'Denis' in a bed covered with a patchwork quilt on which is the figure of a Red Cross Knight. Maureen asks Denis what has happened to them. There is the sound of wind and a piece of paper blows across.]

They calm Bertha and explain their view of the situation, then go to look in the cellar. They find a store of food, including chicken which seems, amazingly, to be fresh-cooked. They also find bottles of alcohol and a corkscrew.

Everyone eats and drinks. Magark dances. Fred, unimpressed by their response, predicts that the food will soon run out and they will die. They accuse him of cracking. Fred and Fat argue. Sirin comforts Bertha. Fat offers her wine and names her 'Bertha', because according to him that is what all big-breasted girls answer to. He slaps her thigh and she laughs. Fat and Sirin begin to quarrel. Bertha placates them.

Maureen accuses Fred of stealing her piece of chicken and of being over-familiar. Magark tries to prove that Fred is crazy. The Helper disappears.

Magark starts to invent fanciful memories of how he came to the island and he identifies Sirin as an old school friend. When Sirin says he was privately educated Magark changes the story. Fat joins in the fantasy which grows and grows becoming more and more absurd. Sirin suggests that they are all drugged, hypnotised and part of some morbid experiment. Minnie M suggests they are in Hell and Sirin says it is the land of the dead. Fat suggests this is just one of many islands of the dead – or that maybe it's the nuthouse.

Maureen, exasperated by the nonsense, shouts for them all to stop. She wonders about The Helper, does not trust him, thinks he's hiding something. She points out how he tried to take control.

Arthur M is tipsy. Minnie M is disgusted with him.

All is chaos when The Helper suddenly reappears and stops them. He berates them.

Asks them how long they think they might be there. Tells them that the five who were there before them made mistakes. He suggests rules and that a quartermaster is needed to control the food. Magark and Sirin agree with this. The Helper suggests that Magark be quartermaster. Maureen objects at the lack of trust this implies. The Helper tells her what might happen when hunger sets in. He describes the worst and suggests that she might go berserk. Magark proclaims that he will be quartermaster. The Helper tells him to sleep by the trap-door.

Minnie M wants a protective committee. Magark and Sirin agree that this is a good idea. The Helper produces three flick-knives and gives one each to Sirin, Magark and Fat so that they can guard the food. Fred is deemed too crazy to have one. The Helper suggests that they decide on a punishment for food theft and likens a food-thief, in their situation, to a mass-murderer. He leaves the argument open when Maureen strenuously objects.

He changes the subject. Says he has a yacht – but it has room for only one and there is no wind. He also claims to have a transmitter and receiver – but it is broken and he is repairing it. When asked why he has not gone off before he refuses to answer. He points out the cupboard containing sleeping bags, smiles round, and leaves.

Sirin orders everyone to bed. They get into their sleeping bags and sit watching each other. Fat sits up with his knife in his hand.

[missing pages]

['Maureen's Speech' ('The Rescue') seems to fit in here, perhaps at the beginning of SCENE III]:

Everyone is up and about. They discuss The Helper and his yacht. They don't believe him.

Fat, Fred and Sirin leave.

Magark tries to bribe Maureen for favours with exotic food. He clearly controls it and he rations it out. She is suspicious of him. They leave.

Arthur M offers Minnie M a fat chicken leg and she wants to know where he found it. They hide the food when Maureen enters. She asks Arthur why he is not on food-guard duty and he tells her that Magark and Sirin had talked about it and decided they could all be trusted and guard duty was no longer necessary. Maureen suspects there is something being plotted. She goes out.

Arthur shows Minnie that there is food in the wood-box outside the house. They decide to keep it just for themselves. They gorge on food until Fat, Fred and Maureen enter.

Fred says that he has found a yacht and transmitter by following The Helper's footprints

into the dunes. Maureen is excited. Then Fred reveals that the yacht is a wreck and the transmitter just a heap of rust.

Fred persuades Fat and Maureen to shut their eyes and play an imaginative visualization game to try and retrieve their memories. They don't get far. He tells them that soon they will: that doing this they are waking up.

Then he tells them that there are people in the dunes who need their help. Fat urges him to bring them in. Maureen immediately tells him to hurry and get them and she will prepare food – broth to sip. Fat and Fred go out.

Minnie and Arthur hear of the five people and determine to stop food being given to them. Maureen argues that they are human beings. They argue until Fat and Fred re-appear with five skulls – Fat calls them 'their predecessors'.

SCENE IV:

In a long speech on an empty stage Magark considers their ninth day on the island, the limited supply of food and who has to go first. He wonders who these people are, whether they are important. Is Fred important? Does he even exist to him [Magark]? What would be less if he were gone? Is he less than nothing – easily wiped out? He laughs at his own ghastly brain work. Thinks Sirin is 'fishy'.

[missing page]

Magark gives Sirin food. Sirin asks for chocolate and chicken. Magark tells him it all went four days ago and Sirin comments that Magark has not lost enough weight. Magark tries to persuade Sirin that he and Magark need food to keep their brains clear. The others can be strictly rationed – with just enough food to keep their hearts pumping whilst they lie in their sleeping bags. He does not consider them real.

Sirin points out that they are human and asks what Christians would do. Magark gives a distorted account of religion to support his argument, then accuses Sirin of fooling him. He claims to be a humane man but somebody has to go first. He notes that he has caught no-one stealing yet.

Sirin says they should make an example of the first to steal but that they haven't decided the penalty.

Magark goes off to smoke a cigar, of which he seems to have an inexhaustible supply, and Sirin suggests smoking them will kill him.

Bertha enters and Sirin pounces on her. He asks her why she has been avoiding him and she tells him she's changed her mind and that their relationship is finished. Sirin threatens to withdraw food treats and suspects that she is getting sentimental about Fat. He is angry and warns her of consequences. Both exit.

Fred and Maureen enter. Fred begins to tell Maureen of a dream. He mentions things in it which he thinks she may remember. First she is scornful, then puzzled, then almost convinced by details he provides of their earlier life together.

[missing pages]

SCENE V:

Fat and Fred discuss food and Fat suggests that Magark and Sirin are keeping them hungry so that they have food to trade with Maureen and Bertha for sexual favours.

Fat says he will challenge them and he produces two clubs with spikes which he has made. He says there are two more for Maureen and Bertha.

Sirin enters. He orders Fat around. [There is obviously a fishing roster and the sundial has been built and is used for timekeeping]. Arthur and Minnie enter and Sirin complains that they are late on the job.

Fat demands to know what Sirin is eating, it looks like chocolate. Sirin is defensive. They argue about food. Sirin commands Fat to go and start fishing. He points to the sundial to show him that he is late. Fat smashes the sundial and leaves.

Arthur and Minnie are horrified. Sirin tells them he wants them to do a little job for him. They leave.

Fat enters clutching a few tins and jars. He has discovered a hoard of food and is furious. He says he, too, will hide his finds. He opens a cupboard to do so and out leaps Arthur calling for Sirin. Minnie shouts that Fat is stealing food. Fat runs to escape but Sirin enters and challenges him. Fat is unrepentant and eating.

Magark enters, sees what is going on and he and Sirin try to restrain Fat. Fat fights them. The Helper enters and easily subdues Fat. He threatens to crush him, and demands to know the charge against him.

Magark and Arthur confirm that Fat was stealing and eating food – they say he is guilty.

The Helper suggests that this amounts to murder. Sirin agrees. The Helper asks whether capital punishment has been abolished on the island. Magark says it has not been instituted. Sirin wants to proceed according to the law. Magark invokes The Protective Committee to vote, saying that if there is a majority vote – Fat dies. Fat protests that he is a member of the committee but they withdraw his vote from him. They move to crush him.

Bertha and Maureen enter, are horrified at what is going on and try to stop them. Fred enters but does not understand the situation. Magark and Sirin and The Helper invoke

The Law. Magark pronounces that the sentence is that Fat be killed, and eaten by those who have the stomach for it.

[missing pages]

[In an unnumbered fragment of manuscript Arthur and Minnie discuss poisons and acids, and they comment that they – the others – should have salted him so that he would keep longer.]

Sirin is in the house and Magark dies at the table. Sirin drags his body to the trap-door and drops it down into the cellar. He does the same with Bertha's body but seems sad about that.

Fred and Maureen enter and do not see Sirin. They discuss where the others might be and how hungry they are.

[missing page]

Sirin has the trap-door open and shows Fred the bodies in the cellar. Maureen tries to stop Fred going down there, but he goes. Sirin tells Maureen that she belongs to him now, he's the only authority left and she must be his personal body servant. He seems to be in pain.

Fred returns and tells Maureen the others are all dead, that Sirin has killed them all. Sirin says The Law killed them: he argues that they all agreed to live by the law but they didn't keep their word. Fred questions his authority to make such decisions.

[missing page]

Only Fred and Maureen are left. They discuss their perpetual diet of Skate but Maureen eats some pears which Fred has brought her. She is dismayed when she realizes she has eaten them all without sharing them with Fred. He laughs. He gets her to play the memory game – imagining with their eyes closed.

Both imagine greenery, fertility, beauty, they share images of a nervous stag and a delicate butterfly and their imaginings merge into a single story.

[missing page]

Fred and Maureen think they heard a baby crying in the wind but the wind has stopped. They hear it again, louder. The Helper enters carrying supplies which, he tells them, come from a freighter wrecked in the storm. He has also brought baby-food and a baby, which he gives to Maureen, commenting that the baby is a 'lucky chap'.

In the final line, Maureen reveals that the baby 'is a she' and wonders what they should call her.

[There are two pages with the above ending but in a third un-numbered fragment of typescript Maureen decides to call the baby Frederick (or hand-written above the line, 'Leonard'). Then Fred suddenly sees a ship and the final line proclaims his find].

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalTed Hughes and Shakespeare: "A Particular Knot of Obsessions".

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In 1992, as I was leaving Court Green after visiting Ted and Carol Hughes, Ted suddenly ducked back into his kitchen and emerged with a handful of typewritten papers which he handed to me saying, rather diffidently, "You may not have seen this". 'This' turned out to be a copy of notes entitled A Definition of Mythic in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being. The first paragraph stated that it contained preliminary remarks intended to replace about eight pages of his original 'Introduction', and that it was written because a book about the "psycho-biological/religious/mystical root-system of Shakespeare's dramatic vision" needed readers to approach it with the "co-operative, imaginative attitude of a co-author".

I was dismayed that the negative response of some reviewers to Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being should have made Ted so defensive. Sorry, too, that he planned to present readers with an abstract argument about the "mythic" and/or "realist" personalities of imaginative writers before they even began to tackle the book.

The trouble was, as Ted had told me when we discussed 'The Doorstop' (as Ted and Carol called this book), it was clear from the reviews that very few of his critics had really read it. And the academics thought he was encroaching on their territory: i.e. who was he – just a poet – to write about things they had spent their whole careers studying and teaching? He was challenging their fixed ideas.

In fact Ted's credentials for writing about Shakespeare's work were excellent.

As an eighteen-year-old National Service conscript, doing night duty in an isolated location in the East Riding of Yorkshire, Ted had read and re-read all of Shakespeare's plays. And by the time he was twenty-six, Ted "literally" knew Shakespeare by heart and was shocked that Sylvia Plath had read only thirteen of the plays. Or so Plath told her mother, no doubt exaggerating somewhat in her newly-married euphoria.

Ted's fascination with Shakespeare never palled, and in 1969 he persuaded Charles

Monteith (who was then his editor at Faber and Faber) to allow him to select his own favourite passages from Shakespeare's plays, together with some sonnets and short poems, and to publish them in a "single portable Book".

A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse was published by Faber in 1971 and Ted wrote in the Introduction that the pieces he had "plucked from the body" of the work not only liberated the energy and the unique quality of Shakespeare's language, they also revealed the poet himself. He had plucked out "Shakespeare's heart" and, he went on, "if it has a black look it is well to remember that most readers have decided the plays are healthy".

In his long 'Introduction' to this selection, Ted outlined the religious and psychological conflict caused by the Calvinist Puritan suppression of Old Catholicism in which the Goddess of earlier pagan beliefs still flourished. The religious aspect of this conflict was particularly relevant during Shakespeare's lifetime, but the universal psychological aspect of the suppression of natural human energies, especially sexual and imaginative energies, is clear to see. It was in Ted's writing on Shakespeare that what he called "the tragic equation" was explicated: the love-goddess, enraged by the puritanical suppression of sexual energies, becomes the Queen of Hell – the demonised boar who destroys the hero.

In many ways, this first essay about Shakespeare's 'Great Theme' (later published in Winter Pollen pp. 103-121) is clearer and simpler and more powerful than the much longer exposition of Ted's views in Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being.

What interested me, however, was that Ted noted in both essays that it was certainly partly true that every poet finds metaphors for his own nature – "the master-plan of their whole make-up" (as he put it) – and that this is projected into their work. So, how much of Ted's own nature was revealed by the passages he chose and, in particular, by his elaboration of the "symbolic fable" – the "particular knot of obsessions" – which he described as the single fundamental idea holding all of Shakespeare's work together?

Besides Shakespeare, another area of Ted's early reading was Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, a copy of which was given to him by his English teacher, John Fisher, when he left Mexborough Grammar School. Graves introduced him to the language of poetic myth. And what young poet could not be inspired by the idea that this magical language, bound up with ancient worship of the Moon Goddess, was the true language of poetry? So, at nineteen, Ted addressed his early poem 'Song' to his 'Lady'. And later, in 1973, after reading about the ancient *vacanas* (songs) of the Southern Indian poet-mystics who considered themselves 'married' to Siva, he experimented with writing his own *vacanas*: "You snatched me up and you carry me off / O lady / To sing", he wrote to his 'Lady of the Hill'.

Through myth, Graves also introduced Ted to the Goddess in her many manifestations; not only Muse, Virgin, Mother and Goddess of Hell, but also boar and serpent and many other animal forms. And he wrote of the male gods in every era who had challenged her

power.

Much of Ted's discussion of Shakespeare's great theme can be traced back to Graves's arguments in *The White Goddess*, but the psychological aspect of Ted's "tragic equation" shows just how much he was also influenced by the work of Carl Jung.

Jung's writings are well represented in Ted's library archive at Emory University and in 1977 he told Ekbert Faas that he had read all of Jung's works as they appeared in translation but had "tried to avoid knowing them too well". Clearly this did not work, since he frequently referred to Jung in interviews and in his writing.

Nor should we be surprised, since *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* deals very thoroughly with the many different ways in which Shakespeare explores the workings of the subconscious, that those who are very familiar with Jungian theory are also familiar with Ted's work. In 2006, I was unexpectedly invited to participate in a conference on 'Psyche and Imagination' run by the International Association for Jungian Studies. I have only a limited knowledge of Jung's works, mostly those associated with Alchemy and symbols, but the topic interested me so I accepted. At the time, I was impressed by the frequency with which Jungian analysts and scholars referred to Ted's work and to *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* in particular. Frustration was also expressed that the book was no longer in print and was quite hard to obtain, except as expensive first editions offered on the internet.

Graves and Jung were seminal influences on Ted's work but so too was his early passion for the poetry and the occult interests of W.B. Yeats. One critic dismissed Ted's interest in the occult as his "dotty beliefs", and another writer described them as "endearingly bonkers". Ted was unmoved: "You will be laughed at for your superstitions", he wrote in the opening poem of *Capriccio* and, again, in the final poem of *Howls & Whispers*, where he adds "Let them laugh". And in a letter to Keith Sagar, he wrote scathingly of Auden's dismissal of "the whole of Eastern mysticism and religious philosophy, the whole tradition of Hermetic Magic (which is a good part of Jewish Mystical philosophy, not to speak of the mystical philosophy of the Renaissance) the whole exploration of spirit life at every level of consciousness, the whole deposit of earlier and other religion, myth, vision, traditional wisdom and story in folk belief..." (Letters p.426). Mysticism, magic, Occult Neoplatonism, Hebrew and Christian Cabbala, Gnosticism and the myth of Sophia, all were things Ted studied seriously and understood well, and he discerned all of these in Shakespeare's work and explained them coherently as part of his argument in *Shakespeare and the Goddess...*

Ted was well aware that *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* was a difficult book: difficult to write and, for some readers, difficult to read. For anyone not very familiar with the plays, the "whirl of names", he suggested, might sound like "a betting shop in the basement of the Tower of Babel". At least one ordinary reader was so incensed by Ted's re-interpretation of Shakespeare's work that she wrote to him and, while her original letter is lost, Ted's reply vividly suggests the vehemence of her attack (Letters p.610-11). "I am sorry my Shakespeare book disagreed with you," it

opens. On the other hand, five New Zealand women were so moved by the book that they wrote to Ted explaining that his interpretation of Shakespeare inspired their large and intricate tapestry of Venus and Adonis, woven to be hung in the brand new Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in 1997.

To say that Ted's own knot of obsessions informed and guided his study of Shakespeare's opus does nothing to negate the importance of what he divines in "Shakespeare's heart". Rather, it suggests that Hughes was uniquely qualified to recognise an underlying theme which others had never noticed. He was not just someone who knew Shakespeare's work exceptionally well. As he was writing, he was also reading widely and discussing his ideas, as his letters to Keith Sagar and his dedication to Roy Davids at the front of the book indicate. Most importantly, he was a poet bringing his poetic sensibilities to the work of another poet; and in the whole body of Shakespeare's work he recognised a progressive exploration of many of his own beliefs, difficulties and questions.

To return to Ted's vision of the ideal reader of Shakespeare and the Goddess...: he or she would, Ted hoped, regard his argument "as a sort of musical adaptation, a song" – an imaginative and unified re-staging of the whole body of Shakespeare's work. In 2012, The Globe staged all of Shakespeare's plays. They were performed by different companies of actors from different countries and in different languages. I wonder what further wonders, what pan-global narrative, what 'Great Theme', could have been brought forth had the directors all read Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being.

Hughes, T. Winter Pollen, Faber, 1994;
Reid, C.(Ed.) Letters of Ted Hughes, Faber, 2007.

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Valid XHTML 1.0 TransitionalGaudete and The Reverend Lumb's Parish and Parishioners.

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May

One of the most striking things about Gaudete is the intense sensory impact it makes on the reader. This is not just the result of the dark, disturbing violence of some of the scenes or of the strong erotic and sexual energies which are present throughout. The effect of both of these is amplified by the underlying suggestion of occult rituals and

demonic possession and, more subtly, by the way in which Hughes immerses us in the sounds, the smells, the disorientation of pain, the heat of animal bodies, the feel and the cling of blood, mud and water and the sheer abundance of plant and animal life in the Springtime landscape.

Amongst this sensory richness, the visual element is so strong that Hughes appears to describe the changeling Lumb and his parishioners as if he had a clear and distinct vision of each of them inside his head. Each person is evoked through an accumulation of small details embedded in the poem: we learn what they look like, what their home looks like, what car they drive; and their actions and feelings consistently reflect their personality. Similarly, the landscape in which the drama takes place has a logical and consistent shape, and small details suggest that Hughes had a clear map of it in which to set the 'headlong narrative' through which he wished to push his readers¹.

Major Hagen is the character most clearly pictured, perhaps because Hughes originally intended him to be central to the story². Hagen is a retired army man who breeds beef cattle and keeps a stud stallion. At different times, we see him checking sperm counts and supervising the mating of a stallion and mare. We also see him striding along his chestnut-tree-lined drive in his 'cleated boots' and his tweeds, with his beloved double-barrelled Purdey clutched under his arm. We are shown the 'nicotine-yellow-dullness' of his eyes; the 'exemplary scraped steel hair' on his 'bleak skull'; and the 'ginger-haired, freckle-backed thick fingers' with which he focuses his binoculars as if in a game-hunting machan.

Rhododendrons Inside Hagen's 'squat elegant residence' there is his glass-fronted gun cupboard, his butterfly collection and a hunt-souvenir tiger skull used as a paperweight on his desk. There are parquet floors, cut-glass doorknobs, and magenta tiles and a blue Aga in the kitchen. It is an interior which his thirty-five-years-old wife, Pauline, with her 'nerve-harrowed face' and stylish clothes, sees as 'barren perspectives/ Cluttered with artefacts,[...]/...Icebergs of taste'.

'Anaesthetised/ For ultimate cancellations' by his military career, Hagen shoots birds with cold, military efficiency, and taunts his wife and the Reverend Lumb with a bloody carcass. When roused, however, his crimson-faced anger is violent and uncontrolled. His deadly reaction to danger is displayed when his dog attacks him and he kills it. And his sudden baffled horror when he realises what he has done suggests dismay at his own loss of control, as well as regret for the loss of a loyal dog.

Hagen, alone of all the village men who have been cuckolded, refuses to be part of the disorganised pursuit of Lumb across the fields. Instead, he waits and, like the game-hunter he once was, he watches Lumb jig 'like a puppet' in the 'ten magnifications' of his telescope until he reaches the lake on Hagen's own land. There, united with 'his first love' the Mannlicher ·318, Hagen shoots Lumb in the head from the window of his truck.

All the characters in *Gaudete* are similarly described through the accumulation of small

details embedded in the poem. Far from developing *Gaudete* as a money-making film-script, as he once planned³, Hughes' ultimately created clear and vivid evocations of people and place which need no film for us to be able to see them. He adopted, he said in a letter to Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, an "acting out" style of story-telling', which stirred the senses and 'liberated' his images into 'imaginative freedom' rather than entangling them with an 'intellectual response'⁴. True, his characters tend towards stereotypes and their actions are, as Hughes said, 'slightly puppet like'⁵. Feminists have complained about Hughes' narrow presentation of the women in the story, but the men are equally one-sided. Yet, it is this one-sidedness, this cartoon-like quality, which adds to the clarity with which we see them in our own imaginations and which allows us to experience the dramatic speed and energy of the poem.

In the same way, accumulated topographical details allow us to build an imaginary map within which to visualize the action. Commander Estridge, for example, can see through his telescope, the village; men cutting beech trees three fields beyond Holroyd's farm; and the door of the farm's barn. Joe Garten, cycling home from his poaching in the woods, admires the river and then notes the Reverend Lumb's blue van in the entrance to the quarry. And Betty, who has met Lumb at the quarry, has cycled there from the Bridge Inn during her lunch hour. From information such as this, I developed my own imaginary map and my attempt to draw it can be seen below. I am not suggesting that this is the map Hughes had in his head, only that the visual element of the sensory immersion I experienced as I read the poem was vivid enough for me to place clearly imagined characters in a definite and realistic landscape.

map

1. Faas, E. 'Appendix II', *The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980. p.214.
2. Faas, op.cit. p.215.
3. Letter to Keith Sagar, Reid, C. (Ed.), *Letters of Ted Hughes*, Faber, 2007, pp.383-5.
4. Letter to Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, p.428.
5. Ibid.

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Ted Hughes' *Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom*
First Published in *Ted Hughes : Cambridge to Collected*, M. Wormald, N. Roberts, T.Gifford (Eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

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Some time in 1973–4, Ted Hughes read A.K.Ramanujan's book, *Speaking of Siva*¹, and, in the *vacanas* of the Siva-worshipping mystics of Southern India, he discovered

poems written in the same simple, direct, honest speech as that of his own early poem 'Song'². 'Song', as he told Drue Heinz, had come to him, 'as such things should in your nineteenth year – literally a voice in the air', when he was a National Service conscript doing night duty at RAF Patrington in the East Riding of Yorkshire³. It was the first of his poems that he ever kept. Twenty-four years later, he was so excited by the rediscovery of that 'voice' that he wrote to close friends like Daniel Weissbort and Lucas Myers exhorting them to buy Ramanujan's book.

He then took a new notebook and began to write his own versions of these Kannada vacanas⁴.

Unlike any of the other notebooks which Hughes kept at that time, this Vacana Notebook⁵ has survived intact. So, it is possible to see the order in which these poems were written; and to follow the development of Hughes' vacanas from his first, fairly close, modelling of them on those of Basavanna, the twelfth-century Indian poet-saint, through greater and greater freedom from Basavanna's words, to poems which are wholly his own, although still conforming to the ideals and the general style of vacana poetry.

Siva Nataraja

These ideals are based on the mystical process of becoming one with a god or with a divine Creative Source. The god to whom Basavanna addressed his vacanas was the Indian god, Siva, in a local manifestation as 'Lord of the Meeting Rivers'. For Hughes, the Creative Source was never identified with a particular god but he saw the manifestation of that Source everywhere in nature and so chose to address his vacanas to the 'Lady of the Hill'. She was, in many respects, identical to Robert Graves' White Goddess, but she was also simply the animating force in nature, and she was Hughes' poetic Muse.

Lady of the Hill

Whatever god is addressed, vacanas are a form of worship in which the devotee speaks directly and truthfully to the god as an ordinary man or woman might speak to a particularly demanding husband or wife, using natural, colloquial language to express their love and devotion, but also to vent their anger, puzzlement and despair.

'I'll sing as I love', wrote Basavanna⁶: and he sings of the pain and ecstasy of that love. But he also argues, pleads, demands, questions and berates. He acknowledges that a price must be paid in order that he may be worthy of this union, but he complains that he does not understand why he is treated so badly or know what, exactly, is required of him. Hughes' vacanas, too, follow this pattern.

Vacanas have no formal metre or rhyme, and very little punctuation. But they do have the 'swift, living voice of the oral style'⁷ which Hughes admired, and their rhythms are those of folk-song, traditional folk-tales and riddles. They are full of repetitions and paradoxes and, although they are spontaneous and passionate and grounded in common everyday experiences and images, there is often a hidden, spiritual meaning in

the worldly metaphors and allegories the poet uses. Above all, they are an intensely personal form of a religious devotion which not only avoids formal creeds, rituals and dogma but frequently criticizes them as misguided, superstitious and even hypocritical.

In these Indian vacanas, Hughes found again 'a style as close and natural' to him as that of Crow, which, as he told Faas was 'simply picking up a style that I had neglected earlier' 'the way I wrote for a while when I was about nineteen'⁸. He also found the 'ideal vernacular' which he heard in Shakespeare's language: the 'super-easy' language which goes directly 'from centre to centre'⁹. Here, too, he found poetry which develops 'outwardly into history and the common imagery of everyday life' and also develops 'inwardly in a sort of close parallel', a quality which he admired in Yeats' poetry and which he considered to be essential for any writer's development¹⁰.

Ramanujan describes the inward, spiritual development of the devotee, which can be charted in the vacana sequences of the Indian poet-saints, as the ascent of a mystical ladder. The six steps of this ladder lead the poet from devotion, through discipline and knowledge, to enlightenment and ecstasy and, ultimately, to complete union with the Creative Source.

In order to make this ascent, the Indian poet-saints regarded themselves, quite literally, as the true husbands or wives of the god. They dedicated their lives to their god, and become worldly brides or bridegrooms struggling to achieve the spiritual perfection which would allow them to become wholly one with the god. Constantly, they strove for that spiritual union; and worldly unions are seen in their vacanas as unfaithfulness to their spiritual spouse. 'Other men are thorn / under the smooth leaf', wrote the twelfth century, female, poet-saint Mahadeviyakka. 'I cannot take / any man in my arms but my lord // white as jasmine'¹¹.

Hughes, in his vacanas, only partly adopts this convention. He becomes the spiritual bridegroom of his Lady of the Hill and struggles to be worthy of that union. He sings to his Goddess in just the same way as Basavanna sang to his Lord of the Meeting Rivers. However, he sees his Goddess's presence in every human female: 'It has taken every living woman / To make a body for you to live in.' he writes¹². Thus, worldly unions were not proscribed and, in his vacanas, they are seen as part of his Goddess's testing of him and part of his spiritual learning and growth.

Whilst the poems in Hughes' Vacana Notebook do express the many difficulties of a worldly bridegroom who is devoted to his spiritual spouse, his own poetic journey up the spiritual ladder is less apparent here, where he was learning to write vacanas with Basavanna as his teacher, than it is in the Epilogue poems of Gaudete¹³. These Epilogue poems were chosen from the hundred or more vacanas which Hughes had eventually written¹⁴, and only eighteen of them came from the Vacana Notebook. Nevertheless, the poems in this notebook do demonstrate a poetic journey. They are written in the simple, 'full-frontal sort of music'¹⁵ which is characteristic of Crow, and they have the same primitive power: but the speaker is fully human and has, already, a clear spiritual goal. Hughes' vacanas are clearly another step in the Alchemical

transmutation he was striving for when, as he later said, he revived his preoccupation with the 'Difficulties of a Bridegroom' – a phrase which he discovered in 1962 through the seventeenth-century Alchemical work of John Valentin Andreae¹⁶, and which became the working title of almost everything he wrote for several years¹⁷.

No discussion of these poems can convey their extraordinary power. Hughes began his study of vacanas in the traditional Indian way by choosing a guru, but, although he modelled his earliest vacanas quite closely on those of Basavanna, the strength of feeling and emotion in them is wholly his own, and his communication with his Goddess is intensely personal. The naked vulnerability of this is such that in several of those vacanas which Hughes chose to include in the *Gaudete Epilogue* and, later, in *Orts*, the first person pronouns have been transposed to the impersonal 'he'. Not until he wrote the poems of *Capriccio*, *Birthday Letters*, and *Howls & Whispers*, did Hughes address the Goddess as openly and directly again, or draw as openly on his personal life; and it is notable that the language of these late sequences of poems is as simple, direct and personal as that of Hughes' vacanas, and the women to whom they are addressed are never named.

Basavanna

* * * * *

The first vacana in Hughes' *Vacana Notebook* is closely modelled on the first of Basavanna's poems in Ramanujan's book.

'Look' demands Basavanna, 'the world, in a swell / of waves, is beating upon my face'¹⁸. Hughes similarly demands attention: 'Watch me', he begins, but although the images he uses are similar, it is not the waters of Basavanna's Lord of the Meeting Rivers which threaten him but the rising tide of pollution in our own world, which is the world of his 'Lady', Nature.

At this first step of the spiritual ladder, both men are struggling with the world, its ills and its temptations. Basavanna cries out to his Lord in anguish as he describes worldly troubles rising from his heart to his head and threatening to drown his spiritual concerns and silence him. In Hughes' vacana, however, the tide of pollution is as real as it is metaphorical: his foothold is insecure, 'fouler drink and more rubbish' threaten his body: 'Why should it build at my chest', he asks: 'Why should it rope at my throat'.

Both poets express their puzzlement but, unlike Basavanna, Hughes has not yet learned humility. Basavanna questions and pleads with his god: 'How can I tell you anything / when it has risen high / over my head / lord lord / listen to my cries /'. Hughes puts his questions more bluntly, expressing sheer frustration rather than a plea for help: 'Lady / How can I bring you what I bring you / When it has risen over me'.

Hughes' next two vacanas extemporise on the same theme of besetting worldly ills, and, since vacanas always reflect the poet's own life, he chooses his own metaphors for this. The sickness of the world becomes 'Like a dog in the home' bullying him for attention: 'It will not let me lay out / My gifts for you, lady. / It devours them or defiles

them'. Then, for the first time, he gives his Goddess her full title: 'Lady of the hill', he demands (or pleads, depending on how you read it) 'Drive away this dog and destroy it / You are abler'. Once this is done, he says, foolishly presuming that she can be bargained with, 'Then I will give you / Myself'¹⁹.

The next poem is more cryptic and much more personal in its symbolism. It is also less arrogant. The world, in this third poem, is a sterile 'wolfless domain' into which someone has loosed a rabid wolf. The wolf, for Hughes, was a totemic animal and always, in his work, wolf energies can be both destructive and creative. Now, this wolf 'Follows, in the wood' and he asks, 'Whose pet was it? / Or whose captive?' He makes no claim that it is his Lady's creature but she, he says, has 'the salve / the tool of execution' and 'the courage' to deal with it. Yet, he does not want it killed. 'All I need is your presence', he tells her, 'To give me the wolf's tail'.

Sometimes, especially early in his apprenticeship to Basavanna, Hughes' remaking of the vacanas is clear to see. At other times, the words and imagery which Hughes drew from his own domestic setting are so different to those used by Basavanna that only a common theme or message can be discerned. This remaking went on in the Vacana Notebook with greater and greater freedom, until Hughes had worked through all but the last few of the vacanas by Basavanna which are in Ramanujan's book. Then, suddenly, the poems are completely Hughes' own²⁰; and it is from these that the eighteen poems which were included in the Gaudete Epilogue were chosen.

As an example of a close remaking of a Basavanna poems, VN 6 is one of the clearest. Yet, without knowledge of Basavanna's vacana number 52 one might easily take Hughes vacana for an early Moortown poem. Both poets once again depict the bridegroom's struggle with the temptations and ills of the world. Both liken themselves to a cow wallowing in wordly mud. Basavanna has, he says, 'fallen into a quagmire', where he 'make[s] mouths at this corner and that'. He wails that there is no one to look for him and that no one will find him until his Lord 'sees this beast / and lifts him out by the horns'. Hughes, too, is 'Like a cow sunk in clay quag'. He bellows or sinks in silence but knows that 'Neither man nor tractor' can help him. He, too, knows that only his beloved can save him: 'Only you / Descending from your hill / Can lift me, cleanse me, restore me / O lady.'

Another of Hughes' vacanas, which might well be misinterpreted without Basavanna's parallel poem for comparison, uses a metaphor which occurs only rarely in Basavanna's vacanas but is common in those of Mahadeviyakka. As a female poet-saint, Mahadevi defied social and cultural conventions to become one of the mostly male worshippers who dedicated their lives to Siva. For her, especially, 'marriage' to Siva meant that she regarded any relationship with a human male as adultery. 'My lord, white as jasmine, is my husband'²¹, she wrote, and 'I cannot take / any man in my arms but my lord'²².

Unfaithfulness was the common metaphor in Indian vacanas for any neglect of the god (or goddess) for worldly things; and, the blunt, colloquial word which is translated as 'fornication' was the favoured way of describing this. So, whilst both Hughes and

Basavanna begin one vacana, 'I went out to fornicate', it would be unwise to take this statement at face value. Both poems are, in fact, warnings of the dangers inherent in over-indulging in worldly pleasures and excitements, and neglecting your Lord or Lady. When Basavanna 'went to fornicate'²³, he was stung by a scorpion, stripped by a watchman, and beaten by his 'husband' when he got home. 'All the rest, O lord of the meeting rivers', he complains, 'the king took for his fines'. The scorpion, the watchman, the husband, the king in this vacana – all may be avatars of the god or the god himself.

In Hughes' poem²⁴, the indiscretions and punishments he suffers are similar, but he states quite clearly that the danger was to his soul. When he 'went out to fornicate', he was shockingly burned, stripped and beaten 'by a waiting gang', and the woman who nursed him was a witch who 'stole my soul and roasted it, inside her own'. When he got home, there was 'nobody to help' and 'the damage was bad'. 'Heal me, Lady of the Hill', he pleads. 'Cool me with your health'.

Such, are the punishments for those things which Hughes describes in another vacana as 'running after sugars'²⁵. Punishment, however, is accepted and proudly borne, because the 'scars' it leaves are his Lady's 'signature' of ownership. All Hughes asks in return for his suffering is some direct knowledge of his Lady. 'Only show me yourself', he begs, 'Lift off me the last amercement' and 'Let me thank you'.

Basavanna, in a parallel poem, asks to be blinded, deafened and crippled, so that he may not see, hear or follow anything but his Lord²⁶. But everything Hughes had learned about mysticism and magic by this stage of his life would have made him wary of tempting the gods by asking them for such specific disabilities. So, he speaks only of his devotion and his willingness to endure.

Hughes clearly understood the experiences Basavanna describes and had felt the same spiritual longing – the same shamanic 'call' to devote himself to the Divine Creative Force. By drawing on his own life and his own world he charted a parallel spiritual journey but it was not yet his own journey, simply steps along the path which Basavanna showed him. So, the poets move together from worldly concerns of temptation, endurance and puzzlement, to expressions of their growing understanding of a Divine presence in all things. They express their understanding that spiritual enlightenment cannot be gained by worldly means. They know, and they try to teach us through their poems, that no physical endeavour, no amount of hard work, will get us to heaven: neither 'the engine under the car bonnet', nor 'the factories', nor 'the labour of all heads and their talk' can 'catch one tremor' of that Divine presence²⁷. Religious instruction, dogma, ritual, and mechanical ways of worship have already left us, as Hughes later wrote in *Remains of Elmet*, 'at the dead end of a wrong direction'²⁸.

'Parrots recite', writes Basavanna scathingly in a poem which deals metaphorically with religious ritual: 'So what? / Can they read the Lord?'²⁹ But only Hughes calls on his Lady to 'Correct the direction finder' and (in lines which combine all the elements and recognize the healing alchemical power of Nature) 'Let me find you / Without losing the water, or the air, or the fire / Or the earth'³⁰.

Although these poets see the energies of the Divine Creative Source, god or goddess, present everywhere around them, they discover that no words, no image, no metaphor can describe that Mystery. So, the inadequacy of words and the impossibility of describing their experience of the Divine is a common theme in vacanas. This difficulty is readily apparent in the frequent deletions and revisions in Hughes' Vacana Notebook. Vacanas VN 56 and VN 76, for example, both deal with Hughes' attempts to find words for his Lady's beauty, but 'grubby words' or 'epithets' and 'slimy' phrases will not do. Amidst the many deletions and corrections, Hughes describes his efforts as being like using newspaper and string to wrap beautiful roses. And the final lines of both these vacanas sum up his problem precisely: 'Words fall withering / On the sudden spring / Of your emergence'.

'Have words / Any part in your worship?'³¹ Hughes asks. And he calls his own words 'provisional', 'like the trial and error sign language / Of an explorer who is nearby to the lost temple'. 'Even just bare words', he says, are only 'blazes, marks on trees' showing 'the way of his penetration'. Words are deceptive, temporary, 'forgettable'³²: they evaporate 'If the speaker's smile says otherwise'. So, 'Look at me Lady', Hughes begs, 'Listen to all I do not manage to say'³³.

Basavanna, an excellent poet, bewails his lack of poetic and musical skills. He knows nothing, he says, of metre or time-beats; nothing about 'iamb and dactyl': 'I'll sing as I love'³⁴, he declares. Similarly, Hughes reports: 'I sang to a beautiful girl / Whatever came into my head / I just sang it'³⁵. And both poets ask to be made into instruments suitable for this devotional work. 'Make of my body the beam of a lute' suggests Basavanna to his Lord of the Meeting Rivers: 'Clutch me close / and play your thirty-two songs'³⁶. Hughes, in a parallel poem, asks his Lady of the Hill to reshape him 'to the necessary form': to make his head 'a clear resonator', his bones 'a tried frame', his nerves 'tensed to your scale'. 'Hold me', he demands, 'In the hall of your people / Then sing your song'.

There are warnings in these vacanas, too, of the dangers of becoming the bride or groom of a Divine being. If, like a shaman, you have been called and you have accepted that call, there is no going back. Basavanna's warning is blunt: 'Don't you take on / this thing called bhakti [devotion]'³⁷. And Hughes, using different imagery, tells us that it is 'Better, happier to stay clear of the pure / Water of the source'³⁸. Both poets describe the inevitable pain of serving your Lord or Lady. For Basavanna, it is like a saw which cuts going in and coming out; like putting your hand into a pitcher which contains a cobra: it is potentially deadly. For Hughes, there is both joy and pain in knowing and serving his Lady but the results are far reaching. Nothing, he warns, will ever be the same again. Your everyday world will smell of decay. Your hunger for the Divine will be like that of a lover for the loved one's company; and for 'the kiss / especially for the kiss'. You will be irrevocably changed, but still tied to your human body: 'the you you have to die with – stays', like 'stone / of the stone hill' over which the pure water of this Divine Source still flows.

Such are the difficulties of any bridegroom or bride who is helplessly devoted to a wife or husband whom he struggles to understand and please. And such, is the difficult quest for spiritual enlightenment in a world which makes demands on the body at every moment. Basavanna likens this to having 'a grindstone hung at the foot' 'a deadwood log at the neck'. He is held between the two, unable to 'float' or 'sink': neither able to let his soul fly, nor able to immerse himself wholly in the everyday world³⁹. Hughes chose metaphors from his own life, where he was juggling the conflicting demands of farming and writing:

The cow groans in the field
Her calf half in the world
A pain expands in my head
Calling to me for help.

One drags him 'toward the door', the other to his table to write. Torn between these two seemingly irreconcilable demands he prays: 'O Lady of the hill / Deliver both / And deliver me from both'⁴⁰.

In a later vacana, which has no clear parallel in Basavanna's poems, he is even more blunt about this difficulty of reconciling the demands of body and spirit: 'Body and mind, you see / Get nowhere', he tells his Lady of the Hill, 'You will have to carry something'.

Nevertheless, in the spiritual journey which Basavanna's poems chart and which Hughes' vacanas follow, both poets know that the Divine is an inextricable part of everything in the world they live in and that they are part of that unity. 'It is not a difficult etiquette / But a simple marriage' says Hughes. And he sees that whatever he does in the world will affect his Goddess: 'This is how my cruelties / Make my life miserable', he tells us, 'For she and I are one flesh / One spirit'⁴¹. And, to his Goddess: 'I know you are here beside me / Always and everywhere', but, 'This is my home / And I feel no fear, only joy / Very strong steady joy/ And dismay // O Lady of the Hill'⁴².

'You snatched me up and you carry me off / O lady / To sing'⁴³, Hughes tells his Lady. And, at this stage in his Vacana Notebook, he began to break away from his steady paralleling of Basavanna's poems and to sing his own songs, adopting the vacana tradition of 'kin-sense and kindness for living things....a love of man, beast and thing'⁴⁴, and also the equally traditional rejection of the veils which formal religion and religious dogma put in the way of Truth.

Both Basavanna and Hughes recognized that Truth and unity with the god cannot be taught. Basavanna, in a number of vacanas, decries various Indian religious and cultural rituals, practices and superstitions. Hughes speaks of own experience of the spiritual quest. Some, he says, 'wear crosses' and show 'souvenir' keys to 'the treasures of heaven', but not the true key or 'the treasure' itself⁴⁵. 'I have / both key and treasure / Of the living One', he says, 'But can I show either?' And, in a poem which was to become the first from the Vacana Notebook to be included in the Gaudete Epilogue: 'churches topple / Like the temples before them. // The reverberations of worship / Seem to help / Disintegrate such erections'⁴⁶. By contrast, Hughes' 'lady of the hill' (the

phrase is partly deleted in the Vacana Notebook and completely missing from the published poem), endures and flourishes in the natural world around him.

All of the poems in the last half of Hughes' Vacana Notebook reflect his own direct knowledge of the Goddess and of her absolute power. They express, too, his experience of living in two worlds, the mundane and the spiritual, and being unable to belong wholly to either. Sick with love, he is 'rusted firm' not to 'East West North or South / But to the Centre'⁴⁷. Most of the time he is, as Ramanujan puts it, 'a fool of god'⁴⁸, half mad with ecstasy and fear.

Hughes' Lady of the Hill is everywhere around him. She 'Is an ocean of marvels' which he will 'never fathom'. And to be 'within touch / of her and hers and her' is, likewise, a mystery. Yet, whilst her choice of him fills him with 'bafflement and joy', her power also fills him with terror. 'O lady of the hill / You scare me', he admits, citing the 'inhuman cruelty' involved in the complete loss of Self required of those who accept 'initiation'⁴⁹ into her mysteries. Her terrifying beauty and power invests his vision of nature. He sees it in the frailest 'primrose petal's edge' and in 'the eye of a hare'. When she is revealed to him, 'and is veiled' it is, he says, like being gripped 'by the nape' and banged against a wall 'Till blood drips from the mouth'⁵⁰. Yet he accepts that pain, acknowledging that it 'cannot really be given', 'only paid down/ Equal, exactly'⁵¹ for her presence. Whilst other men spend their lives bitterly seeking acknowledgement, recognition and respect for their learning, he 'like a criminal' keeps secret 'in terror' his knowledge of the 'deep touch' of his Goddess's fingers⁵². Yet, like everything in this world, he knows he will never experience more 'Than the fleeting warm touch / Of your footfall / / as you pace / Your cage of being'⁵³.

Unlike any of the vacanas in Ramanujan's book, Hughes sees his Goddess embodied in every woman. Basavanna (in vacana 430) wrote of his Lord's 'eighty-four-hundred thousand faces' and begged him to 'put on just one / and come test me'. But for Hughes, 'every living woman' embodied the Goddess and was a test which She set for the human male. 'Like hooks / That catch men / For the future of the species', he wrote, and they are 'cleverly baited / And angle cleverly'. 'I sickened', he remembers 'for this one's this and that one's that', 'for that one's elfin side glance' and (using an image he would later use to describe Sylvia Plath in '18 Rugby Street' in Birthday Letters) 'for that one's long smoothness / her flanks lithe as a fish'⁵⁴. Human love and passion may seem like union with the Goddess and may, indeed, be a way of honouring her, but although these women embody her they are only shadows of her true self. They are 'wild and naked' as a foxglove, but she is wild and naked 'as a fox'⁵⁵.

Nevertheless, through his relationships with mortal women Hughes learns hard lessons. In two poems early in the notebook, when he was still following Basavanna's path and bemoaning with him the ills of the world, Hughes wrote: 'Horrible things happened / They taught me / How they need not have happened'⁵⁶. And 'I had what is called love / So much such a weight of it / The axle broke / On the cart of everything that was not love'. It was, he said then, like being taught a language but 'understanding nothing'⁵⁷. Now, in the later poems, he understands, but that does not always make things any easier for

him. In images which describe both human love and love of the Goddess he writes:

We built a life together

Out of feather looks

Hay smiles

Wool-whisp words and weaving of doings.

This was a life built out of careful 'provisioning' 'burrowing works', and 'rowdy badger play'. But 'we could not live it'. All he wants, he tells this woman/Goddess, is to live 'just for a while' in the evolving 'space tower capstan / Of the universe' which he sees in the beauty of nature. But clearly this is an unworldly, seemingly impossible dream, whether the woman is human or a goddess.

The final stage of the spiritual journey, however, is union with the Goddess in which there are no divisions, and no more need for worship, questions and uncertainty. Hughes knows that no matter how much he works and dreams of such a union with his Lady, only she will decide when to reveal herself and hold him to her. He knows that she is both everything and nothing, but he knows, too, that nature belongs to her and is her 'stepping stone from nothingness // Across the shoreless'⁵⁸. As he reaches the end of this Vacana Notebook the Goddess is closer to him than she has ever been. She has tempted him, come to him, 'unlaced' his 'hood' and 'whispered "Fly"'. But, 'Now you have opened the door --// What?' he demands. And he is as impatient as any bridegroom:

Hurry, hurry, my love, my love

I rest, I rust.

Soon enough I start falling to pieces⁵⁹.

Finally, almost at the end of the Vacana Notebook, the marriage is consummated. Hughes describes the ecstasy of being one, however briefly, with the Goddess. The poem, which became the final poem in the Gaudete Epilogue, is full of the 'Glare' which assaults him and transports him. It is everywhere around him, coming from the grass, from the clouds, from the 'home gloom'. 'Blinded' he closes his eyes but 'the darkness too is aflame'. 'So', just like this, at last and in this way, he marvels, addressing his wonder to his Lady, 'you have come and gone again / With my skin'⁶⁰.

Nothing can be or will ever be the same again, and the final poems in Hughes' Vacana Notebook reflect this. Almost all of them were included in the Gaudete Epilogue, but in different order and at different stages of that particular spiritual journey. Only one, however, has the dramatic impact and the sense of fiery unreality which Hughes captured in 'Glare'. It is the final poem in the Vacana Notebook, and it was based, as Hughes told Ekbert Fass, on a dream⁶¹. It begins: 'Something to sing about / The rattlesnake dropped from a comet', and, with many deletions and corrections it describes Hughes' complete dislocation from the Earth, his rebirth 'In a blowing of particles' as 'a blind bare puppy'[deleted], and how 'God'[deleted] gave him 'your thumb to suck'[deleted]. What is substituted for these deletions is very close to the version of the poem which was published in the Gaudete Epilogue with the opening line 'The viper

fell from the sun', and both Sagar and Scigaj identify it, there, as a poem describing shamanic rebirth.

'Glare' bears some resemblance to a poem by Allama Prabhu which begins 'Light / devoured darkness'⁶². But although Allama's poem is as simple and as brief as Hughes', it does not have the terrifying climax of Hughes' final two lines. The image of complete helplessness – of a man, naked and disorientated, 'like a discarded foetus', who is then taken up and nurtured by the Goddess – is an image of rebirth which is almost equally appropriate to the shaman's rebirth after becoming a skeleton in the underworld, as it is to the devotee's final rebirth in complete physical and spiritual union with the Divine Creative Source.

Having filled his Vacana Notebook, Hughes continued to write his own vacanas. Then, as he was working towards the publication of *Gaudete*, he decided that a sequence of vacanas would make an appropriate conclusion to the Reverend Nicholas Lumb's return from the underworld. The real Reverend Lumb was always intended to have a shamanic role in *Gaudete*: his visit to the underworld was an essential part of his negotiations with the Goddess and Hughes had intended to write this underworld journey as a parallel story to that of the changeling Lumb's adventures in the real world, but he never did so⁶³. Instead, a sequence of vacanas came to chart Lumb's negotiations with the Goddess. 'In these poems', Hughes told Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts⁶⁴, 'Lumb adds up several women in his life, assuming them, as he does so, into that female in the other world (or hidden in this world)'. Then, acknowledging the way in which his own personal life was integral to these vacanas, he said: 'Naturally, I could only lend him people I have known'. He went on to note that the woman in the vacana which begins: 'I know well'⁶⁵, for example, was a friend, Sue Alliston, who lived, as he once had, in 18 Rugby Street (like Sylvia Plath, she appears in '18 Rugby St.' in *Birthday Letters*) and who was, at that time, dying of Hodgkin's disease.

In two other vacanas, Hughes borrowed women who had been important in his life: Sylvia Plath, in the vacana which begins 'Once I said lightly'⁶⁶; and his mother in 'Waving goodbye from your banked hospital bed/...'⁶⁷. Neil Roberts notes that both Rand Brandes and Len Scigaj suggested that these two poems refer to Sylvia Plath⁶⁸. William Scammell, in an article in *The Poetry Review* in 1998, also made this claim⁶⁹. Hughes, however, specifically denied that 'waving goodbye...' is about Sylvia Plath. In a telephone conversation with me shortly before his death he confirmed that it was about his mother, Edith Farrar Hughes.

Very shortly after *Gaudete* was published, Hughes told Sagar: 'the poems at the end seem to me about the furthest point, so far, some of them – Even so, they leave me very unsatisfied'. That 'whole batch of writing', he said, now looked 'provisional and interim'⁷⁰. Hughes' Vacana Notebook, therefore, should be seen as exploratory and experimental: as the first steps in writing a particular kind of poetry, rather than as a carefully thought out and ordered sequence. It does, however, represent an important step in Hughes' development as a poet. Not only did it re-establish the simplicity and power of a language that he thought he had lost, or neglected for too long, it also